

# Nothing Compared to a Lifetime

*About a Child, About Loss, About Faith*



Michael Dolce

## Dedication

*for Nadia Grace*

Despite your indescribable loss, please know that you can find an abundance of love in this world.

*for Luke and Sarah*

I am so sorry that you will not grow old alongside the beautiful brother who loved you so dearly, and him beside you.

*and for Mandy*

You are his *Mama Mandy*, always, the purest love that he knew on this Earth.

## Prologue

When I first started writing the story in the pages that follow, I had no intention of sharing any of it with anyone but my therapist. I started writing about my son and our lives together shortly after the second anniversary of his death while trying to come to terms with what happened to him. In many respects, the second year was worse than the first, as many other parents who lost children too warned me would happen, parents I met in a monthly Compassionate Friends support group meeting. I started attending a few weeks after my son died. Our group has chapters nationwide and I attended two of them, one near my home in Florida and one in D.C., where I was traveling for work frequently at the time. Parents in both locations gave me the same warning, so I figured it must be a common experience, not just that of a few.

Despite what I was told though, I didn't really understand how the second year could be worse than the first until I lived through it. Unlike other losses I had experienced, the passage of time did not help this one to fade. The only thing that faded, it seemed, was the interest of most others in my life even to mention what happened, ask how I was doing with my loss, or talk about my son at all. Their progression is understandable, but as they moved on, I felt more alone than ever, still overwhelmed by uncontrollable waves of grief, daily. While trying to go about my regular life, what I was living through was at once excruciating and confusing. And it was changing me in profound ways.

So, as I entered year three of life without my son, I found myself writing more and more. Writing had helped me in the past with other major life traumas, though this one was so different and so much worse than anything I had experienced before. I found that if I wrote down what I was living through and wrote about what it seemed to mean in the moment, I could detach from it just enough to make some sense of it, to be less overwhelmed by it. So, I started writing about whatever came into my consciousness and read it out loud in weekly therapy sessions. I wept through much of it.

There are two reasons that I decided to take those writings and fill in the blanks to share with others my son's story and what my life with him has meant. First, the more I wrote, the more I felt a need to share with others a bit of who my son was in this world with the hope that those who read this might find meaning in his extraordinary life experiences that I was privileged to share. I learned so much from my son. I believe that his story has a lot to teach us about love between parents and children. I believe his story speaks to us also about the simultaneous fragility of childhood and the resilience of the human spirit that children so often show us, inspiring us in our adulthoods. I believe that his courage and essential humanity in the face of incredible challenges simply to survive, from his birth to his death, inspired those of us he left behind and can inspire still others.

I feel too that his story says a lot about courageous mentally ill and disabled persons who too often are seen only for what troubles them and what they struggle to do, rather than seen for the same beauty, hopes and aspirations they have as others not so afflicted. My son railed against being seen for his disabilities. It often impacted his choices in life while trying to get away from his identity as a developmentally disabled person, even at times to his obvious detriment. I hope the story of my son's experiences can help in some way to ensure that those like him walk an easier path in the future.

My other purpose is to share the profoundly traumatic experience of losing my son with the hope that other parents who have lost a child, or anyone else who has suffered an untimely or senseless death of a close loved one, may feel less alone as they struggle to cope in the aftermath. I feel less alone as I share my experiences with others in Compassionate Friends meetings. I hope that others might draw something that helps them from reading this story of another. If inspiration or a little bit of healing is drawn by those who reflect on this as they live through their own traumas, I will be glad to have shared this story.

Before I begin though, perhaps I should disclaim a few things. I do not intend here to grieve gratuitously a profound loss in the presence of others for the sake of it. I seek no pity or consolation from others. The grief from loss of a child is obviously severe and it is a grief unlike any other, I believe. If I know nothing else, I know that there is nothing, truly absolutely nothing, that anyone can say or do to ease the pain I feel in the loss of my child. The best I have sought is the best that I have received already, the presence of those from time to time who have sat with me in silence as I agonized over this loss, so that I have not had to spend each of those moments alone.

Most of the time though, the grief rages when I am alone, when there is nothing and nobody to distract me from it, to hold it at bay. It is comforting to have someone else there at times, though more often than not I feel that I unfairly burden those who sit with me, that it is too much to ask because there is nothing that they can actually do to make it better.

I have grieved plenty in public about what is written in these pages. In fact, most of this was written in two public places, at a bistro table on the sidewalk outside a favorite coffee shop and at my favorite old diner, some seventy years old, where the staff soon became familiar companions, knowing to seat me at a corner table and bring coffee without my having to ask for it as my computer booted up. The regularity of their presence was comforting, as was the Labrador who showed up each day at breakfast to eat scrambled eggs alongside his companion who sat in his regular seat at the bar counter.

As I wrote at these places, I cried often and never felt the need even to look up to see who might be watching or reacting, let alone hide those tears. For me, the tears came both from what I was reliving as I wrote and, at times, from witnessing the many parents who were often in the area, enjoying time with their children. It was bittersweet to see so many parents connect with their kids. I was truly happy for them but could not help each time being taken back in my memory to moments like theirs that I once had with my son, memories now awash with sorrow. Along the way, I came to believe that grief is as legitimate an emotion to display to others as any other. It is part of our human experience and a significant one. An important one, I believe. So, I seek nothing in response to what I share here.

I certainly do not intend to hold myself out as a model for how to cope with a tragic loss of someone held so dear. I have coped no better and perhaps worse than so many other parents I have met on this journey who have suffered a similar loss. I profess no particular wisdom or source of strength. In fact, I'm very confused by it all and feel beaten down.

In these pages, I speak at times of my journey of faith, a faith shaped and impacted as much in my life by extreme trauma as anything else, and certainly one deeply influenced by my life with my son and the fact that I now live life without him. It is not my intent to suggest here that I have cornered the market on wisdom of who God is or is not, why we are here on Earth, how to achieve whatever eternal life or salvation might be, or any other divine mysteries. I am the first to admit that I have far more questions than I have answers.

Indeed, I taught Sunday school to fourth and fifth graders for a quarter century and always refused to tell them what I believed. When they asked, I reminded them that the purpose of the class was to help them explore and understand what they believed, not to get them to parrot what I might say is truth to me. Even within the four walls of our church, not everyone believes the exact same things about God, I would tell them. So, it is certainly not my intent here to project what I do or do not believe about God so that others come to agree with me. The loss of my son has left me with far less certainty about the Devine and the truth of the creation we live in than ever before.

But to share this story without being honest and open about the impact of these events on my faith would be to leave it materially incomplete. That said, I do hope that what I share here about facing challenges to my faith in very traumatic times can help in some way to inspire others on similar journeys to face their truth unafraid, to heal and to find the god, goddess or gods of their understanding. If so, then sharing this story will have been worthwhile for that reason too. And for that I will be grateful.

1

This is My Son  
January 1997

It was not the first picture to arrive in the mail of a child living in a Russian orphanage, needing a parent, needing a family. They had been showing up one at a time, over several weeks, each one of a precious child accompanied by a few pages of information. Will you accept this referral, the cover letters asked? If not, another was sent. Each one I tore open anxiously and each one tugged at my heartstrings. All the children seemed to look at me through their photos expectantly. The first ones did not feel quite right. I didn't feel that I should accept the referrals, though for no reason I could articulate.

But then one arrived, and I immediately felt different when I saw the little bright blonde-haired boy with a gentle, hopeful smile. Unlike the others before, I took this picture to my best friend, Don, and with a slight tremble in my hand, gave it to him, and said with a smile that I could not contain, "This is my son. His name is Ilya."

Next a call to the adoption agency, *I want to accept this referral.*

*Congratulations, they said, you are going to be a dad.*

But I already was. This little boy had already stepped out of the photo and into my heart. I felt I knew him already, that I could see the delightful character of the child just in his gaze at the world around him. I felt that he was mine to raise. I believed that God drew us together halfway around His globe. I lifted my gratitude up to the Heavens and asked God for the strength and wisdom to be the father this child needed, to be worthy of the gift of fatherhood.

It took months before we could meet, as forms were filled out and signed and processed by government officials and entered into computers and errors made and errors corrected, me hanging onto every step, anxious for the day I could actually embrace my son for the first time. He was aging into his fourth year of life, though he was just the size of a two-year old, the result of a premature birth and years of deprivation since, as his homeland struggled to provide for his needs through harsh winters with food shortages and limited heat. I needed to take better care of him.

Finally, September 1997, the call came. *You can meet him now, they said.*

Three flights and I have crossed the globe to Vladivostok, Russia. My little boy is walking hand in hand with a nurse into the orphanage director's office where I sit on the edge of a sofa anxious through the final seconds until he appears at the door. The nurse kneels at his side, her arm around his waist. *Ilya, this is your papa,* she says to him, looking from him to me with a smile. And he smiles at me, the smile that melted my heart in his photo, and he walks into my waiting arms.

Over each of the next few days, I am allowed to spend several hours with him in the orphanage. I see how wonderful he is and we start to interact more and more as he gets used to my presence.

He is smiling at me a lot, both inside as he goes about daily life of eating with his friends, playing in the playroom with them, or all of us going outside to play on the playground together. Each morning when I arrive, he is glad to see me, embraces me.

But as the week comes to an end, with more administrative errors, *You will have to come back for him in a few months*, I am told, *hopefully December*.

*Please make sure he knows I will be back for him as soon as possible*, I plead with the director, trying already to hold onto the memories of us on the playground outside the orphanage the few short days we have had together. *Give him this picture of us, so he doesn't forget*, I ask as the time comes for me to leave, alone.

A pleasant, reassuring smile crosses her face as she hears my question translated. She speaks for just a moment, just a few words, folding her hands across her lap as she finishes.

The translator turns to me, tipping his head to one side, joining her in a knowing smile. "She says, 'A few months is nothing compared to a lifetime.'"

2

## Essence of Self September 1997

In the couple days in Russia before I had to return home without my son, I arrived each morning at the orphanage along with other new parents, though they were not similarly afflicted with administrative delays. They were to take their children home at the end of the week. When we arrived in our van the first morning, we were shown into the areas of the building where our children lived, each with a dozen or so other children. It looked like there were four such areas and we were told the children were grouped by age. Children lived in the orphanage from birth to age six, after which they would move to another orphanage for older children.

When I entered through the kitchen into Ilya's home, I saw my little boy seated at a child-sized table beside a window. He was smiling as he playfully bumped back and forth into a little girl to his right. She giggled as he did so. He looked up at me and smiled a bit more broadly as I sat down on the floor next to him. He gave me a hug before turning his attention back to his friend to continue their game. Moments later, one of their caregivers brought bowls of porridge to the table for each of us, pausing to rest her hand gently on their heads before walking away. She and the others like her wore identical white outfits, like nurses, and stayed with the children in eight-hour shifts, two of them at a time.

Ilya picked up his spoon to start eating. It was huge for him, an adult-size tablespoon. He stretched to fit it in his mouth, but he appeared used to it, not bothered at all. Each child at the table had a similar sized spoon.

After breakfast, the children lined up and went to the bathroom as a group. I looked in through the open door to see each child go to one of a dozen chamber pots lined up against the walls and sit down almost in unison, chattering away to each other the whole time. They would return there later in the same regimented fashion between lunch and nap time.

After the bathroom break, we followed the children into their large playroom. Chairs were set up near the wall for us to sit with our children, while the children still awaiting adoptive parents began to pull their toys out of wooden boxes and shelves along the wall. Ilya sat beside me watching his friends, telling one as he passed that I was his "Papa."

I took a Pez dispenser out of my pocket, the fruit flavored candies nestled inside. I showed him how to tip the head back to get a candy out. He grinned as he took hold and learned how to extract the prize. As he bit into it, I repeated "Pez" several times, pointing to the dispenser. "Pez," he repeated back, almost in a whisper, as if he was thinking about it, though he pronounced the "e" as he would in Russian, so it came out, "Pyez." His first word in English.

Shortly, another little boy approached Ilya, emerging from a group of children playing nearby. He looked very agitated, brow furrowed, speaking rapidly while gesturing back to the group. He paid me no mind but for a quick glance, focusing intently on Ilya. He spoke too fast and with too many



words I did not recognize for me to even get the gist of what he was saying with the limited Russian I had been able to teach myself the past several months. But he clearly was looking to Ilya to resolve some upset.

Ilya sat and listened for a moment, then smiled at his friend while reaching a finger out to tickle his belly. His friend stepped back a little out of reach and continued his rant. Ilya leaned forward to tickle him again, twice, a gentle smile on his face the whole time. He said a few words and then extended his hand to give him a piece of the Pez candy. With that, Ilya's friend smiled back, his agitation melting away. He returned to his group of friends to play, no sign of what had been bothering him. Ilya waited a moment before sliding off his chair, glancing over his shoulder at me, before joining the group to play.

One Saturday many years later, beneath a hot Florida sun, I was driving with Ilya and his sister Sarah, my biological daughter, in the back seat of our car. We headed south from our home in Palm Beach County destined for a day out on the town in Fort Lauderdale to celebrate his birthday along with Danielle, a dear family friend they loved. We didn't make it though. Just a few miles from her house, while at an intersection waiting for a traffic light to turn green, I glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw a large pickup truck swerving in and out traffic, obviously speeding. My last thought before the truck smashed into the right rear corner of our car, just two feet from where Sarah was sitting, was that he couldn't stop in time now if he wanted to. Sarah screamed on impact. The truck bounced off our car and careened into three others before finally coming to a stop. I spun around, ripping off my seatbelt to make sure my children were ok.

I could see them both alert and moving. Sarah kept screaming as I tried to calm her with my words. *Everything's going to be ok. You are ok. It's over now*, I said. But I knew the truck struck near the gas tank, so inside myself I started to panic, afraid for an explosion. We must get out right away, I thought. I flung my door open, then frantically opened Ilya's door to get the children out. Ilya had already unbuckled his seatbelt when I got to him, so he slid past me easily. I had to climb in to free Sarah from her child car seat. I lifted her from the car and carried her to the side of the road about fifty yards away, Ilya running beside me.

I looked at Ilya now, sitting alongside his sister in the grass, as police and paramedics swarmed the chaotic scene. He was clutching her shoes. She was still screaming, in shock. I was shaking, still frantically trying to figure out what I needed to do. *Here you go, Sarah*, he said calmly, leaning over to help her put her shoes on. Her screams subsided. I sat down beside the children, looking at what Ilya was doing and feeling so very proud of him in that moment. He had the serenity that I could not muster, the presence of mind to look around before making his own way to safety to see what his sister might need in the moment, grabbing the shoes she always kicked off onto the floor. It was his presence that brought peace to his little sister. And to me.

3

## The Two of Us December 1997

We were gathered in the lobby of the hotel in Vladivostok where we had stayed for the past eight days, several couples, plus three of us new parents traveling without a partner, each with our no longer orphaned children. I was sitting with Ilya on the floor as our adoption agency representative and the translator greeted us and explained what would happen during our last few hours in Russia.

The translator was one of my favorite people, ever. He had been the one who translated the orphanage director's wisdom to me three months earlier. His look of empathy and nod of reassurance that the director was right reinforced her message. And more, his joy when he saw me on my return to Russia in December. *I'm so glad you made it back, I'm so happy for you both*, he exclaimed, a huge smile crossing his face as he wrapped his arms around me tightly in a bear hug.

*It's about an hour drive to the airport*, he was telling us as we started to gather our belongings, the children's toys and stuffed animals strewn across the floor as we waited for the vans that would take us to the airport. We snapped and zipped our bags closed as the agency rep warned us to keep our entire adoption file with us at all times. Each file contained our children's original adoption certificate and new birth certificate showing us as the new parents, with certified English translations included, and their Russian passports.

Also enclosed was the lengthy certified verdict from the Russian Federation court that had granted the adoption petition. That too was in Russian with an English translation stapled to it. Ilya's verdict found my then wife and I fit and financially prepared to raise him, taking note of our income, medical insurance and professional occupation, and our sizable home that would provide Ilya his own bedroom.

It would, in fact, be a new experience to have his own room. In the orphanage, he shared a bedroom with at least ten children, their beds side by side and nearly wall to wall in the bedroom, so close they nearly formed a giant bed the children climbed across to get to their place to sleep. It took Ilya some time to get used to sleeping in a room alone, without other children. He would go to sleep in his room each night, but at some point would get up, leave his room and go lie down on the floor at the threshold of his new baby sister's nursery, falling asleep there until morning. His sister Sarah was born to us just a month before I brought Ilya home.

I read the verdict again in detail the night before, both the English and Russian versions, after Ilya had gone to sleep. I had taught myself to read the Russian Cyrillic alphabet in the year before the adoption. Doing so helped me to learn the proper pronunciation of the language and I found that I could absorb and retain vocabulary better if I could see and write it, not just listen to it on a tape. I tried to pick up new vocabulary from the verdict and the lawyer in me found the verdict interesting.

The verdict was the outcome of a court hearing unlike any that I had experienced as a lawyer in the U.S. Despite being the person petitioning for the adoption, I was not allowed to have a lawyer. Nor a chair. I was shown into the courtroom and asked to stand at the foot of a long conference table. I could see the judge at the opposite end, sitting expressionless. She watched me carefully as I walked in, which didn't help my nervousness. For no good reason, I feared my petition would be denied.

I wasn't sure what to do with my hands or arms. In seconds I ran through the options in my mind. At my side felt awkward and I didn't want to look like I felt awkward. I worried that putting them in my pockets would be seen by the judge as too casual. I knew from jury studies that clasping them in front of me would establish a physical boundary between me and the judge and could be perceived as me trying to hide something. Didn't want that. *You're overthinking this*, I said to myself, settling on unbuttoning my jacket and clasping my hands behind my back.

The translator who had greeted me in the hallway introduced me to everyone, beginning with the judge. She nodded in my direction but remained expressionless. U.S. judges would be all smiles at an adoption hearing. Maybe she's already decided to rule against me, I worried.

To her left, I was told, were the two representatives from the departments of health and education who were currently responsible for Ilya's care. *They will testify about the child's needs*, I was told. *And they will testify about how you interacted with the child at the orphanage when you visited*, she added. *They have a full report from the caregivers who watched you*. That was news to me. I had no idea I was being evaluated while I was there, but it made sense to me when she told me.

*Next to them*, she proceeded, *is a lawyer who will advocate to the judge that your petition to adopt the child should be granted*. That was a relief. Odd we never got to speak, I thought. It was a fleeting thought as she directed my attention to the judge's right.

*Across from her*, the translator said, *is the lawyer who will argue that your petition should be rejected*. That was a bit of shock. No such thing in U.S. adoption proceedings. I had no idea someone would be there to try to stop me.

*The judge will ask you questions now*, she said finally, *and I will translate*.

I looked to her face for some reassurance, but she was stoic, as expressionless as the judge. Did she know something that I didn't, have I already lost, I thought? I turned to face the judge who started rattling off questions about my background, about my work, about my home. Partway through I thought to myself, you need to remember to smile. But I couldn't. I was too worried as the lawyer against me was interjecting urgent statements to the judge, much more energized than the lawyer who was supposed to be on my side, who was saying very little actually. Neither of their statements were being translated and they were talking too fast for me to have any hope of picking up anything with my rudimentary Russian. Just the judge's questions were translated. I knew that it would look forced if I smiled. And nobody else was smiling anyway.

But then the judge paused, staring at me, and asked, *You spent some time with Ilya. How do you feel about him?*

I couldn't help but smile now. *He's an absolutely beautiful, wonderful child. We had so much fun together. Please let me adopt him. I really want to take care of him.*

She smiled, ever so slightly. With that, and a thank you, I was dismissed and escorted back to the hall by the translator. She told me to wait there. It might be a while, she told me, before disappearing back into the courtroom.

With still nowhere to sit, I leaned against the wall. I felt the wait would never end. I stared at the courtroom door, desperate for it to open. After an eternity, the translator pushed the door back open. She was smiling now as she walked up to me. *Congratulations, the judge granted your petition. You will have your son tomorrow.* I breathed a sigh of relief and started to cry. Ilya was my son now, for real, and forever.

I was still basking in that moment a week later, my son now at my side, as I doubled checked the paperwork in the minutes before we were to leave the hotel for the airport. I made sure that I had in the adoption file the sealed envelope, emblazoned with a warning across the seal that it was not to be opened except by immigration officials upon arrival in the US. Inside were Ilya's immigration papers issued by the U.S. embassy in Moscow. It was from that embassy that all immigration requests were processed, thousands of them in the 1990's. Our adoption group, we were told, was the first to be allowed to handle the paperwork through a courier sent from the US Consulate in Vladivostok to the embassy in Moscow. We were the first group spared the more than six-thousand-mile journey across seven time zones to be there in person. All prior groups made the trip and then flew out of Moscow back to the U.S.

The morning of our departure we were warned again by the agency representative not to break the seal. *If you do, she said, upon arrival in the US, your child will be placed on the next plane back to Russia.*

Our translator added his own warning. *You are the first group to leave through Vladivostok. The Russian customs officials are new to this process, he said. It's their first time too. Don't let them open the envelope either.*

I looked at the envelope. The warning was in English only.

The arrival of the vans was announced next. We bundled ourselves and the children up as warmly as possible to face the frigid Siberian winter outside, though it was never really warm inside either. It was time to say goodbye to our hotel. We were leaving behind hallways darkened at night with more lights off than on to conserve electricity. The restaurant with the huge menu, but most items not available due to the severe winter food shortages. We learned quickly to stop trying to select from it and simply ask the wait staff what they were recommending that day and then order that. Ilya and I had been subsisting largely on borscht with a dollop of sour cream and whatever bread was available. I detested sour cream, but when little else is available and you get hungry enough it's actually quite good.

I made the mistake at one point of asking what Ilya's favorite foods were. The translator placed a hand on my shoulder. *Truly, we just eat whatever we can find in the winter*, he said patiently. I felt embarrassed that I asked in the first place.

The agency had warned in advance that food could be scarce, so I brought several dozen energy bars from home, each packed with calories and stuff necessary to survive. Before the week was over, I had to give up on them, having eaten them at every meal, or just as a meal, until I gagged on the taste of yet another one and decided it was better to be hungry for a while instead. I left the remaining ones in the hotel room.

In the hotel lobby now, I knew it wouldn't matter this time tomorrow. A few more hours we'd be on the plane. We'd fly north from Vladivostok, tracking the stunning mountains that spanned the eastern coast of Russia. After a refueling stop we would finish the northern journey and cross over into U.S. airspace in Alaska, destined for Anchorage, where we would land to clear U.S. Customs. It would take about fourteen hours and my new friend, Joe from New York, probably the happiest new dad I have ever met, would be eating the pizza he pledged to me that morning would be his first meal back stateside, with an extra large Coke.

But it felt bittersweet to me to leave, as much as I yearned for pizza and a Coke too. For all the hardships the other parents and I had dealt with for those few days, that adversity had been a way of life for our children and would continue to be for the people we met who had been caring for them. We had experienced a society of beautiful people, who in the face of all they lacked showed us what mattered most, their compassion as they embraced us and helped us to form our families. They showed us how they cared for the children the best that they could with what little they had. And it was not just the people whose job it was to care for the children and process the paperwork for their adoptions. It was everyone we met, from strangers on the street who congratulated us as a new family, while bending over to smile at Ilya and pull his hat down over his ears to make sure that he was warm, to the translator who so authentically celebrated the day Ilya and I were united.

These were a dignified and loving people, I had experienced, and it was not what I had expected. I had come of age in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. I was raised to see the Russians as cold, callous people who despised democracy and were bent on destroying the U.S. with nuclear bombs that had proliferated to tens of thousands of warheads in the arms race between our nations. My school held regular "duck and cover" drills to practice sheltering under our desks or in hallways for the inevitable day the Soviets would bomb us or invade. Our school, after all, was in a military town. I heard the sound of munitions testing at the Army's Edgewood Arsenal every week from my home and us kids fought communists in the nearby woods with our toy guns regularly. We were always the victors.

So, I had been raised to see the Russians as a society of jealous people who would entrap their own to prevent them from seeing and inevitably embracing the democratic nations of the west with the draw of our excesses of material wealth. The few defectors who escaped stood as testament to our superiority we were taught. But these were the same people who were now sending their precious children to families in the west, to be forever citizens of the United States. These were the same people who now warmly embraced me, and the other Americans with me, and gave us among the happiest moments of our lives.

The hotel too was Ilya's first experience living anywhere other than the orphanage. He played in these hallways with the other children, hugging them goodnight each evening. I overheard him one evening telling one child he was going to his "dom" now, the Russian word for home. He didn't understand what a hotel was and had no idea what lay ahead, an actual home with a regular family. These were concepts that were new to him. It was all new to him. And his first airplane ride was next. I could hardly wait to give him that experience.

Right before we boarded the vans, the translator approached me. He gave me a single piece of Russian paper money. *It's not worth much*, he said, but flipping it over he showed me that it commemorated Vladivostok. *Please save this for him, for when he is older, to help him remember where he is from.*

*I will*, I promised. And I kept that promise, delivering it to Ilya when he turned eighteen, telling him of the translator who gave it to him.

When we got to the airport and piled out of the vans and got inside the terminal, the agency rep and the translator said their goodbyes.

*We cannot enter the customs area*, they told us. And we were told the customs officials on the other side probably spoke little to no English. So just hand them the adoption paperwork and passports and let them figure it out, we were advised.

*I think Michael should go first*, one parent chimed in, *he's the only one of us who speaks any Russian.*

The others quickly agreed. *I am far from conversant*, I protested, *I have just enough Russian to get by with a child.*

*More than I got*, Joe said with a chuckle, ushering me to the front of the line.

So, through the door Ilya and I went, the first of our group and the first newly adopted family ever to depart Russia through Vladivostok. The room was rather crowded, with several lines leading up to small booths, each with just room enough for one customs official behind a high counter. Ilya played with a toy car on the floor while we waited our turn. When we reached the booth, the clerk greeted me in Russian and said several things quickly that I could not follow at all, so I just handed over the passports and adoption file. He started reading it all, which took some time, then picked up a phone and spoke into it for several minutes while flipping the pages of the file back and forth. His demeanor was one of concern and that only appeared to deepen the more he talked. He hung up the phone and stared at me for a moment and told me to wait a minute. That much I understood.

Moments later, a very tall Russian soldier appeared at my side, a large rifle hung on his shoulder. My first thought looking up at him was that I was not sure he had smiled any time recently and probably did not do so often. He looked me over and looked at Ilya before turning to the customs clerk and talking about the paperwork for a few minutes. He then turned to me and asked in broken English if I spoke Russian. No, I said, not even alluding to my partial ability to communicate. I



figured if I said otherwise it would just quickly frustrate everyone when my limited ability broke down in any discussion of the papers. So he turned back to the clerk to continue their discussion.

At that moment, Ilya pushed his toy car across the floor about twenty feet back towards the door we had come through. He then ran after it, pushing through the lines of people now behind us waiting their turn. Afraid to leave my spot, in perfect Russian, I called out for my son to stop and return to me. The soldier realized what I had just done before I did. I was preoccupied making sure that Ilya was back at my side and I had a good grip on his hand.

The soldier spun on his heel to face me. *You said you don't speak Russian*, he said sternly to me, his voice raising and his face looking more humorless than ever.

Before it even registered with me that he had just spoken to me in Russian, not his fragmented English, I answered in perfect Russian, *I only speak a little Russian*.

I felt myself go flush. He said something else in Russian, this time something that I did not understand at all.

*I didn't understand that*, I said, this time in English, picking Ilya up into my arms to make sure he didn't run off again. He said nothing, turned back to the clerk and picked up their conversation, glancing over his shoulder at me periodically. At one point they picked out the US embassy sealed envelope.

I yelled. *Please don't open that*, I said, leaning over to point to the warning across the seal. They set it aside, glancing at me suspiciously.

I started listening as intently as I could to their conversation, picking up a few words here and there. Suddenly, their concern clicked with me. They kept referring both to Vladivostok and Nahodka in the same breath and I could see them looking back and forth between the birth certificate on blue paper and adoption certificate on green paper. Ilya was born in Nahodka, which appeared on his adoption certificate. The new birth certificate was issued after the adoption and listed Vladivostok as his place of birth. It was explained to me three months earlier that the Russian court would legally change his place of birth to Vladivostok. The reason was not entirely clear to me, but it seemed to have something to do with an oddity in Russian law that orphans must depart the country only through their city of birth. Vladivostok was home to the nearest international airport. As a lawyer, I was used to legal fictions, though this one was a bit odd. I thought little of it until this moment.

So, I interrupted the soldier and clerk, in Russian. *I can help*, I said. I set Ilya down to sit on the floor. *May I show you on the papers*, I asked?

I was handed back the file. I fished out the court's adoption verdict and scanned it for the place that said, "based upon the Russian Federation Procedure Code ... the place of birth is to be Vladivostok." I was so grateful I had taught myself to read Cyrillic.

*Look here*, I said. They took turns reading the verdict, then nodded at each other, a look of relief replacing their concern.

*Sorry*, the soldier said to me, *we thought you had the wrong child*.

The clerk stamped our passports and ushered us past his booth and through the next door, where we found ourselves in the terminal. The other families passed through that door in short order, reunited with us.

*Any problems getting through*, I asked?

*No*, I was told, *nothing to it. They just glanced at the papers, stamped the passports and sent us through*.

We had made it through our first big challenge in the world together, this little boy and I. We were going home. It felt really good. I could take care of this child, I was sure, as he climbed the steps ahead of me to board his first airplane. And the orphanage director was right. The months of delay and uncertainty until the moment Ilya and I were truly united as father and son faded from meaning as he lay curled up under the seat where a carry-on bag would fit, lulled into a sound sleep by the airplane's vibrations through the floor as we flew over the Pacific Ocean. I was bringing my son home and the past no longer mattered. We had a lifetime ahead of us.



4

## Indelible Past October 1998

When Ilya and I first met at the orphanage, we played together in the front yard of the building, where the playground was. But for a sidewalk to the door in the middle, it spanned the entire front of the building. Each piece of playground equipment had been painted over several times, chips deep at the edges revealing each layer, a testament to their age. While it struck me how aged it all looked, especially compared to what I was used to seeing on playgrounds in the U.S., the children did not care. They just joyfully clambered over a jungle gym, swung on swings and popped up and down on a seesaw, each one painted bright sky blue, grass green or bright yellow.

As I lifted Ilya off a slide and flew him through the air like he was an airplane, making the sound of the engine for him, he laughed uncontrollably. All the while, one of the other adopting parents had her new son, Ilya's friend, standing on a brick wall that was about three feet tall and having him falling backwards into her waiting arms. *It will help build his trust in me*, she explained to me, as she hugged her child tightly to her, an assured smile on her face and a smile of contentment on his. She had already raised three children to their teens. For the past few days, I had been learning bits and pieces from her about being an effective parent, drawing as much from her example as her words.

Meanwhile, a pack of raggedy looking dogs scampered by the playground. As they barked, several of the children scrambled to grab stones from the ground and started throwing them at the dogs. Ilya stayed at my side as I set him down on the ground, though he watched his friends intently as they scared off the pack. The translator, standing nearby, saw me tense up and didn't wait for me to ask. *The children are taught to do that*, he said. *Dogs run wild here. Many people can't afford to keep their pets.*

It was different in the U.S. Shortly after we arrived, Ilya made his first visit to his cousins' home, who lived just a few miles from us. They were both very excited to have Ilya as their new cousin. They fawned over their new baby cousin, Sarah, but Ilya arrived already big enough to play with them. Ryan was just about a year older than Ilya, his big sister Rebecca just two years older than her. Rebecca and Ryan also had a very large dog. So, when we arrived and the front door was opened to let us in, the dog jumped up on us and greeted us with guttural barking.

Ilya leapt onto me to escape the dog and climbed me as high as he could. I had to unwrap his arm from around my neck so as to not choke, but he clung to me, digging his fingers deep into my shoulder blades. I carried him inside, his head spinning back and forth to look around my head and over my shoulder for the dog his uncle was now holding back by its collar, still barking his greeting at us. Once inside, his Aunt Helen had Ilya sit on the corner of the sofa and surrounded him with cushions to keep the dog away. Despite all the reassurance that he was safe, me sitting beside him, Ilya still pressed his body against the back of the sofa and sunk down as deeply as he could to hide behind the cushions. So, in short order, his uncle put the dog into a bedroom and

closed it inside. This scene was repeated time and again in the months that followed during visits to other family and friends' homes, as we tried to teach Ilya that dogs here were different than in Russia, they were pets here and he could be safe with them.

Almost a year later, we had made little progress in helping Ilya overcome that part of his upbringing. It was late October when he and I flew to northern Virginia, landing at the recently renamed Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport just across the Potomac River from D.C. It was his first flight since arriving in the U.S. We were there to have him assessed by Dr. Ronald Federici, a world-renowned pediatric neuropsychologist who has particular expertise with the developmental needs of children adopted from far eastern orphanages. Ilya was to spend a full day being evaluated by him for any lasting impact of birth complications or having been raised in an institution for so many years.

I knew there had been some adverse impact of Ilya's past on his development and with each passing month the signs were that it was likely to be more substantial than expected. I knew that, at the least, he had developmental delays beyond his small physical size. In addition to having been born prematurely and exposed to alcohol in utero, I learned shortly before leaving the orphanage that the result of wintertime deprivation was that he didn't grow that time of year, which further explained why he was so much smaller than a typical child his age. Ryan, for one, towered over him despite being just a year older.

The information that was available about his development and any health impact before I adopted him was quite limited and some of it, the adoption agency had cautioned, could be unreliable. Ilya had not received a complete evaluation of his medical conditions and needs in Russia. The resources for such an effort were apparently scarce. The best information that I had came from a medical school professor in Minnesota. He made himself available to parents adopting overseas to provide an educated guess on the conditions of children in orphanages. He accepted by mail any available paperwork describing the child and any photographs and videotapes that could be obtained.

I sent him all three about Ilya. The paperwork was a single report, not two pages long, and the information on it was already several months out of date. At age three, he weighed less than twenty pounds and stood just two and half feet tall, the average size of a healthy one-year-old boy. The report characterized his mental and social development as equivalent to a child of fifteen months. The same age level was provided for his speech development, which was described as him speaking only "simple words and phrases, consisting of two words."

It also stated that he had congenital toxoplasmosis, a parasitic infection received from his mother in utero. The infection can cause a miscarriage or stillbirth. Ilya did not have any known medical problems in infancy that the infection can cause, such as seizures, an enlarged liver, jaundice or eye infections. But as a result, he remained at risk of developing mental disabilities in his teens. Only time would tell.

The adoption agency provided a videotape of Ilya that an agency representative in Russia had recorded and photographs she had taken. In them, he could be seen smiling at the orphanage caregivers and walking quickly across a room to give one of them a hug. He appeared to be very

small as the written report indicated, but he did not look gaunt or thin. He looked well cared for and happy.

The professor called me after reviewing all the materials. He said that Ilya appeared to be healthy, at least physically, with no apparent physical disabilities. He said it was likely that Ilya's premature birth, slow growth since then and institutionalization since birth would likely cause him to have some developmental delays that could take years to overcome. He predicted that Ilya would likely have academic problems too and that his delayed language development would have him lagging his peers in school for some time, that he might never catch up.

*He's not likely to grow up to become a lawyer like you and will probably not even go to college,* he told me. *If you're ok with raising a child who will have a career in something like truck driving, then I think you can move forward with this adoption. I think he's going to be all right.*

*I love trucks, especially monster trucks,* I replied, *and it doesn't matter to me what my child does for a living, just as long as he's happy.*

*Well,* the professor said, *he sure looks happy in these photos. He's a handsome little boy. Congratulations.*

Since arriving in the U.S. though, as the newness and special celebrations of our family coming together gave way to our daily routines, Ilya's struggles to cope and to function became steadily more apparent. Getting through the day with Ilya's challenges quickly became far more important in the moment than worrying about what his occupation as an adult might be.

Ilya was showing signs daily of problems with basic functioning necessary for socialization and academic learning. He was easily distracted and always struggled to sit still. Each night, moments after putting him to bed, he would get up again minutes later and wander around his room or the house. When I found him, I would put him back to bed, sit with him for a while, read a book or just talk to him until he appeared to be getting sleepy. I would leave then, only to find him up again a short while later. This process would repeat a dozen times or so. Most nights, it went on for hours before he finally exhausted himself and fell asleep for a few hours. On some occasions, though, he was still up and about when I was too exhausted to stay awake myself any longer. Even if I fell asleep on his bedroom floor, it mattered not. I would wake up some time later and usually find him still up.

Trying to teach him anything was very hard because he always seemed to need to be in motion and he typically refused to follow instructions, especially if doing so required him to sit still. Regularly, he appeared to become overwhelmed even by himself and would start making random noises with his mouth or chatter to himself, nonstop, for long periods of time. He would make eye contact rarely, and usually only with me.

I enrolled him in a preschool, hoping that being with other children his age would provide him a place to be surrounded by other children, like at the orphanage. I felt that might help calm him, that perhaps his behaviors at home were simply anxiety from being in such a different place. Perhaps he is simply grieving, in a childlike way, for all the friends he left behind I thought.

But in school, after just a few days of seeming to settle in well, he became aggressive towards the other children. His teachers told me he was having temper tantrums frequently throughout the day. He was prone to emotional outbursts, they said, and was frequently defiant and very demanding of their attention. They described him as having “no concept of self-control” and would become easily overstimulated and disrupt the entire class. They started to question if he could even stay at the school.

In addition to going to school, Ilya was already spending time each week with an occupational therapist to help him with his sensitivity to touch and coordination skills, as well as fine motor control and eye-hand coordination. He was also working every week with a speech therapist to help him catch up with his language development. He liked going to see them both and was making some progress, though each one told me that they had trouble getting him to sit still, stay focused or to follow directions.

As we arrived in Alexandria to meet with Dr. Federici, I wondered if he would be able to help at all. Maybe Ilya just needed more time to settle in. It had been less than a year since he arrived. Wasn't it enough for him to accomplish, I asked myself, to learn a new language, to meet so many new people, to learn a new way of life? Wasn't it enough to ask of him that he be able to get over the sense of loss he must be feeling having left behind in Russia the only home he ever knew, the people who were his family? Not one of the dozens of them was still with him.

Were we all wrong to be troubled by his behavior? He had such limited language development he couldn't possibly be expected to express his feelings about what he was going through, and changes thrust on him. Even the simplest and concrete truths were changing on him. Dogs were dangerous yesterday and needed to be kept outside and at a distance, but now all these new people were hugging on them and bringing them inside. It must have felt like landing on another planet.

But most of all, maybe he was feeling frustrated and angry and confused about losing the many kind caregivers he had and the many children who were his daily companions to play with, to laugh with, to sleep with. How would he even have the words to express those feelings? Imagine, I thought, suddenly losing from your life everyone you have ever known. Imagine that your experience of home and family went from dozens of children and many adults caring for you to only one other child and two adults. Wouldn't that feel like a loss when you had never experienced a nuclear family? Imagine being told, “here is a papa and a mama for you” and you have no idea what those words mean and no way to understand why everyone appears to be happy about it. Doesn't it stand reason, I thought, that he would express those feelings the only way he could, by acting the way he had been in our home and at school?

Just maybe, I thought, the expectations for this child adjusting to all the changes in his life were too high. Maybe the occupational and speech therapy were enough for now. Maybe he just needed time and space to be a little boy, to be cared for as any child deserved to be, to experience this new life long enough to get used to it and come to understand it for all the good and all the love it offered. He was a precious child and I just wanted to be his dad. Perhaps, I hoped, I could just be the dad that he needed, and it would all work out.

By the time we left Alexandria, though, seeing Ilya through Dr. Federici's eyes would help me understand that there was even more to what Ilya was going through than I was seeing and speculating about. But before we could address the impact of his past with the doctor, I was reminded once again of how the simple little things that Ilya carried from his past defined how he experienced life.

As we stepped onto the sidewalk from the cab we took from the airport to our hotel in Old Town Alexandria, we were greeted by a throng of dogs walking in both directions. The moment he saw them, Ilya leapt up into my arms, once again wrapping his arms around my neck and nearly choking me. I struggled to carry him and our luggage simultaneously into the hotel only to find that the lobby was no refuge either. Several dogs were wandering around.

So, I plunked him down on the front desk to check in, leaving one arm wrapped around him to keep him from falling. He didn't let go of me at all, but thankfully relaxed his grip, cautiously eyeing the dogs from his perch.

*What's going on with all the dogs,* I asked the clerk?

*It's Howl-O-Ween,* she said with a smile and delight in her voice, *the dogs are trick-or-treating.*

I read later that Alexandria was considered one of the most pet-friendly cities in the country. Dogs were everywhere that evening, trick-or-treating in all the shops and businesses for treats and bones. Of all places for us to end up.

5

## Prepared for the Worst, Hopeful for the Best October 1998

I traveled with Ilya the thousand miles to Alexandria to see Dr. Federici because he was the best doctor I could find. I was determined to provide Ilya with the best evaluation and care to meet his needs. Dr. Federici greeted us moments after we arrived at his office the next morning. His presence was pleasant and humble, but he carried himself with a confidence that was comforting to me. All that I had read about him in advance of our visit told me that he wanted the best for children adopted overseas and strove to provide hope and wisdom for their families in the face of the challenges they might face. His sincerity was apparent. He immediately engaged with Ilya, focusing his attention on him right away. I could tell he was already beginning the process of observing all that he could about my child in order to do his work.

We sat in his office and talked for a while about Ilya's most prominent challenges each day, both at home and at school. Dr. Federici nodded knowingly throughout as I explained what life had been like with Ilya. Most of his behaviors clearly showed developmental disabilities or adjustment problems after living in an institution for most of his young life. Others were less clear, I explained to the doctor.

I told him how in the past several months Ilya started repeating almost everything that I said to him, word for word. If I said, "It's time to go to the store, get your shoes on," he'd say, "It's time to go to the store, I'll get my shoes on." If I asked him a question, he'd repeat the question back to me before answering. I might ask, "Where did you put your new truck?" He would say in response, "Where did I put my new truck? I put it on the patio." I thought he was just trying to develop more confidence with English, but Dr. Federici had a word for what Ilya was doing, "echolalia."

He explained that echolalia could be an attempt to learn to speak or practice language in young children, usually ending by age three. But in developmentally delayed children, especially those with delayed speech skills, like Ilya, the condition often persisted further into childhood. And Ilya was still learning English.

Shortly, Dr. Federici announced that it was time to start the testing process. He invited me to stay for a while if I wished to. *Sure*, I said, *I would like that*. He asked me to sit off to the side across the room but cautioned me not to say anything.

The doctor sat across a desk from Ilya and started with a simple exercise, pointing to the page with a pencil in hand. He dropped his head down towards Ilya's level, trying to look into his eyes as he spoke to him. Ilya was engaging with him for only a few seconds at a time before turning his attention away to something else in the room. In short order, I instinctively sat forward, my parental anxiety taking over as I yearned to hear my son participate and to answer questions the right way. Moments later I interjected, encouraging Ilya to follow the doctor's lead. I knew it was a mistake the moment I did it, wincing as I finished my own sentence.



The doctor gently placed his pencil down and turned to me. He smiled, slightly. Clearly, I was not the first parent to make this mistake. *That will skew the test results*, he explained to me. *Probably best if you come back at lunchtime*, he said. I apologized, stood and gave Ilya a hug, and headed out the door.

When I returned with lunch, Dr. Federici did not say much about how the testing process was going, instead just asked how my morning in Old Town had been and he let me know he would need the full afternoon with Ilya. The process would resume in an hour and I could again enjoy the historic city until they were finished.

In the late afternoon when I arrived to pick Ilya up, he was still in with the doctor. I sat anxiously in the waiting room until the doctor emerged from his office and invited me in. He told me that Ilya had been extremely hyperactive throughout the day and had a very difficult time attending to the process, to the point of overtly refusing to cooperate several times. As we experienced at home, Ilya talked constantly and sucked on his fingers frequently. He fixated on lights in the room, staring at them while ignoring the doctor's efforts to engage with him. He simply could not follow a simple plan of action, the doctor said.

Ilya, the doctor explained, showed virtually no self-control. *He was even licking my desk*, he told me, with a tinge of exasperation creeping into his even-tempered demeanor, before explaining that he did not ordinarily recommend medication for children so young but would be doing so for Ilya. The medication would help him calm himself and focus so he could learn.

He explained to me the scope of his opinions. He believed that Ilya suffered significant attention deficit, hyperactivity disorder, with a high level of impulsivity and overactivity. He suffered from multi-sensory neurodevelopmental delay. He had both language and visual learning delays. Overall, despite being five years-old chronologically, he was functioning more at a three-year-old level. He predicted that Ilya would have "prominent learning disabilities" that would persist throughout his childhood and teen years.

Dr. Federici attributed Ilya's disorders and delays to both pre-birth and post-birth factors, including toxoplasmosis, possible fetal alcohol exposure, his premature birth and limited opportunities in the orphanage.

The doctor also told me that Ilya suffered from what many children of his background do, post-institutionalized syndrome. He told me that children like my son can have difficulty attaching to parents, accepting them as true parents. Ilya, the doctor explained to me, having grown up in an orphanage for most of his primary developmental years, would not readily accept my parental authority or direction. He had effectively learned to be his own parent, to meet his own needs.

*Talk therapy doesn't work with these kids*, he said. *If he does what you as a parent tell him he should it's because he already happens to agree with you. You must parent him differently than you would a child with you from birth*, he advised. *You have to be willing to let him try things on his own and be willing to let him fall. He will learn from the naturally flowing consequences of his choices, good or bad, before he will learn from what you tell him.*

The assessment was a lot to absorb all at once. I had hoped for much better. My despondency must have been apparent. *Listen, my job is to prepare you for the worst, the doctor said. Come back in a few years and tell me I was wrong. Please.*

We returned home to Florida the next day. In the days and weeks that followed, Ilya continued to struggle pretty much as he had been as we started to implement Dr. Federici's recommendations, including for medication. But fortunately, the medication did seem to be helping him to focus long enough to finish simple tasks and calm down a little, though he remained a frenzy of motion most of the time. No matter how small, though, the success gave me hope.

Dr. Federici's written report of his evaluation arrived in the mail a few weeks later. It was long and detailed, some twenty-seven pages of data, analysis and recommendations. As I read it, I saw additional details that he had not covered in his meeting with me. One finding stood out. The doctor administered a "Children's Apperception Test," or CAT for short. He wrote, "Ilya's responses to the CAT indicate that he is still very sensitive to being alone, afraid, and insecure. There were several themes of separation, loss, and conflict which seemed to typify his early developmental experiences of being abandoned and institutionalized."

Reading that almost a year after we became a family made my heart sink. I wanted Ilya to feel loved, to feel protected, to feel that he belonged. My little boy was afflicted with pain and confusion that no child should suffer. I felt at that moment unsure of what I needed to do to help him to feel fully embraced.

One of the few things that seemed to calm him was being with his baby sister, watching or sitting with Sarah. I would stay at a distance to watch them. Those moments were precious and peaceful to me. But Ilya often looked as if he were somewhere else, leaving me wondering if he was back in Russia, in his mind, back in his first home with the only family that he knew.

When I mentioned to the orphanage director during my time visiting with Ilya there that he was going to be a big brother to a baby sister, due to be born soon, she told me that Ilya was very good with the many babies there, that he was very patient and gentle with them. I figured though, that in time, he would adjust to life living with a regular family in a regular home, not a home with a few dozen children and infants as brothers and sisters. He would spend plenty of time with lots of children in a regular school. I loved my son and he was going to be ok. He was no longer abandoned. He was no longer in an institution.

So, I prayed that I could forever provide him all that a child could need, for the strength to be the father he needed and to stay the course. It would just take some time, I reassured myself. All things in God's time.



6

## The Question Summer 1999

“Why are you my dad?” Ilya asks me this as I tuck him into his bed one night almost two years after I brought him home to Florida. It was a child-sized bed that looked like a racing car, blue, with wheels, matching his pajamas, which were covered with little Formula One racing cars. I was so thrilled to show him the bed when I got him home and first showed him the room. He seemed to love anything with cars or trucks on it, like so many other little boys.

Long behind us it seemed were the bone chilling Siberian winters of his homeland. We had pleasant fall weather for our days outside on the playground in September at the orphanage, but our week together in December as we prepared to leave Russia was spent inside. The chill from the winter winds in Vladivostok was far below zero, as much as twenty degrees below at times, enough to inflict frost bite in minutes to any exposed skin. Ice caked our hotel room window, inside and out. He was used to it, it seemed. He pushed all the blankets off as he slept while I bundled up in wool and fleece beneath as many blankets as I could find.

By the summer of 1998, we had settled into our lifetime together in Florida, his Russian language fading in just a few months as he absorbed the English spoken around him by all who came to embrace him as family, friends, classmates, community. I was the only one speaking Russian to him. It was bittersweet as time passed, English took over, and he stopped recognizing the Russian words I was speaking. I wanted him to be able to keep some of his native tongue, but I knew it was lost for the time being when he started giggling when I spoke, believing that I was just making funny sounds.

It caught me off guard when Ilya asked why I was his father. His voice was calm but with a tone of confusion, and the look on his face was as if he had been thinking about the question for some time. He looked at me expectantly, waiting for an answer. Why was I his dad? I thought first to say that I was his father to give him a different kind of family than he knew. He had never known a family aside from the other children in his “group” at the orphanage and the nurses who cared for them, doing the best they could, to be sure, though not a substitute for a family that is there every hour, every day. But I knew that was not what he was asking, so I didn’t say it.

Before I met Ilya, I read a number of books on adoption and how adoptees feel about joining new families, their struggles and their confusion of how they fit into biological families or why their birth families couldn’t care for them in the past, despite all they might embrace in the present. But nothing as straightforward as his question, especially from a child so young.

My silence as I struggled to come up with the right answer caused him to suggest his own, “Because you teach me things?”

I had no better answer for him and it made sense to me. So, I said, “Yes, Ilya, I am your father to teach you things.” He pulled his blanket up his chest, smiled slightly and seemed satisfied by the answer.

In the lifetime ahead of us, I did teach Ilya many lessons. But, in time, I would come to believe that I learned just as much from him, including some of life’s most profound lessons.

7

## Another Year On October 1999

I took Ilya, now six, back to see Dr. Federici one year later. While I had left Alexandria as worried as I was hopeful, I returned with much more confidence. Since we last saw the doctor, Ilya had continued to receive speech and occupational therapies and was making very good progress, I felt. Two medications, Adderall and Clonidine, were helping him to calm down and focus, and he was less impulsive, so he was learning in school. His teachers said that even though he could still be defiant, his aggression was down, and self-control was getting better. He was even making some friends as his social skills gradually improved. Ilya appeared more comfortable with our family and home life. He showed particular ongoing conflicts with his mother, marked by defiance of her regularly, but he was responding to me and some others better than ever. He was sleeping better, which meant that I was too.

In the past year, Ilya continued to receive the best medical evaluation and care available, providing a clearer picture than ever of what he needed to thrive. Physically, Ilya was still much smaller than like aged children, but he had grown steadily through the year, the first year of his life that he grew year-round. He had been evaluated by a neurologist and endocrinologist, a growth specialist, at the renowned Shands Hospital at University of Florida in Gainesville, about a four hour drive from our home. His maternal grandfather, an alumnus and major benefactor of the school, helped arrange for the evaluations.

Ilya was diagnosed at Shands with spastic diplegia cerebral palsy after an MRI showed that the ventricles in his brain were slightly enlarged and not symmetrical. The disorder was mild in Ilya, the doctor said, and probably developed in him due to premature birth and his very low birth weight. He had a loss of brain mass on both sides, more though on the left.

While many children with cerebral palsy have significant motor control challenges than can render even standing a challenge, the disorder was impacting Ilya mainly in his right leg and foot. They were visibly smaller and shorter than the left side and the muscles were much stiffer. But unlike many children with cerebral palsy, he could still run and walk with no major difficulty and there was real hope that physical therapy would resolve the problems without the need for surgery on his leg or foot. If his right leg was just one-half inch shorter than it was, the doctor said, he would be recommending surgery to lengthen the bone, which would leave him in a cast for several months.

The cerebral palsy diagnosis could help explain too some of Ilya's cognitive challenges, including his poor attention span and hyperactivity. But those challenges had not stopped him from leaping forward the past year in key speech and language skills to the level of the average five-year-old.

In the face of it all, I really wanted to show Dr. Federici our success as much as get his advice for the future, and to thank him for his insight that had guided the efforts to help Ilya. I felt that we had come so far in such a short time and was hoping that he would agree. There were still

significant challenges daily though. Ilya could still be defiant. He had odd vocal tics, even growling sometimes, especially when his medications wore off in the late afternoon and evening hours.

Most of all, though, Ilya still craved constant attention and needed a lot of support and encouragement. It left me wondering if he was still reacting to how he spent his life in Russia, sharing the attention of his caregivers with so many other children. But in the face of our ongoing challenges, I was so proud of my son and all that he worked hard to achieve.

Dr. Federici greeted us as we arrived at his office with a smile and usual calm demeanor. In contrast I realized that I arrived with a tremendous amount of anxiety about what lay ahead. My jaw was clenched, and I forgot to smile, prompting the doctor to ask pointedly if everything was ok that morning. This time, I did not try to stay for the exam, believing that I was simply too wound up and would likely repeat last year's mistake of interjecting myself when I should not. So, with a hug for Ilya and wishing him fun, I headed back into Old Towne until lunch time.

Just like the prior year, my return at noon with Ilya's lunch was met with a lack of disclosures from the doctor as to how the morning had gone. I resisted the urge to ask Ilya specific questions as I ate with him, but he seemed content and said he was having a good time. That left me hopeful that the doctor would end our day with him saying Ilya was making great progress.

When I returned in the afternoon, I tried to read Dr. Federici's facial expression for some indication of how things had gone. But all I could see was him being his usual pleasant self, confident and calm. He invited me into his office again to share his impressions.

The doctor first explained that even on the medication, Ilya was still distractable and struggled to focus and stay on task. He said the medication was having only a "mild" impact and "not a significant level of improvement" on his ability to focus on his own without regular re-direction and structure. As he explained this, my hope for a positive evaluation began to deflate.

He also said Ilya's fine motor coordination was still weak, that he did better overall with hands-on exercises, like puzzles and block design, than anything involving writing. One of the biggest problems that remains though, he emphasized, was his auditory processing. It was very difficult for Ilya to follow even simple verbal instructions for two or three step tasks.

*But his speech is certainly better, the doctor said, praising the intensive efforts of his speech therapist, though he still tends to provide fragmented responses to questions and his speech tends to ramble. He has difficulty with pronoun use and appropriate use of verb tenses. And he still shows echolalia at times, though less than before, he added.*

*That has improved, I affirmed.*

Dr. Federici described the later part of the afternoon, as he experienced Ilya with his Adderall wearing off. *His behavior changed a lot in the afternoon, he said, he became much more defiant and even rude. I had to set very firm limits with him. His ability to stay focused at that time*

*definitely waned.* Ilya, he said, experienced obvious agitation and became moody as the medication wore off. The doctor called it a “rebound effect.”

There were some tests that Ilya simply could not complete due to his developmental disabilities and impulsivity, and if he became too overwhelmed, the doctor described that Ilya would “deregulate” and “fall apart” into regressive and “out-of-control behaviors.” But in the face of those daunting findings, the good news was that the doctor was able to assess that Ilya had improved in his intellectual skills overall, notwithstanding having a long way to go to catch up to his chronological age. In some limited skill areas, he was up to a five-year-old level, leaving him just about a year behind, though the doctor stressed that Ilya was still not ready for kindergarten level schooling. He was struggling even to recognize letters and numbers consistently and could not yet write his own name. Profoundly, he could not retain information or instructions for very long at all and if he got distracted could not recall what he was told only moments before.

*Ilya’s concentration and behavioral problems are still holding him back, but there is clear improvement from using the medications,* the doctor explained. *And his speech and language skill improvements certainly help,* he added. The doctor seemed pleased with Ilya’s progress, which I had waited anxiously to see, validation that we were doing the right things and it was working.

He then shared greater details of his findings, telling me that Ilya’s testing showed him to have a “low average” intellectual ability, but he likely was of at least average intelligence. He was having particular difficulty processing auditory information and tasks, even something as simple as being able to answer the question of how many pieces of an apple you would have if you cut it in half. He needed to be able to see and touch things to figure them out. It was a sign of what the doctor called “significant central auditory processing and receptive language deficits.” It was a mouthful, but simply put, his disabilities were suppressing his intelligence, so it would just take time and effort to help him find his way to access it, the doctor explained.

I was relieved as we said our goodbyes to Dr. Federici and headed back to our hotel to get ready for dinner. Despite the ongoing challenges the doctor highlighted, he found noticeable and significant improvement in my son. He had numerous recommendations for educational and therapy interventions to help him comprehensively to grow and thrive, including further speech and language therapy, occupational and sensory integration therapy with specific programs for attention and memory improvement, a special education curriculum with a very small teacher-student ratio, and supplements to his medications. Despite how overwhelming the complexity of it all felt, I knew that we could provide to Ilya all of the doctor’s recommended care and that felt really good to me.

I had been raising this child for less than two years and it really felt like we had come a long way together. He was only six, after all. I recalled the words of the orphanage director. A few months was nothing compared to the lifetime we had ahead of us. A lifetime to help him grow and accomplish and thrive and find happiness. I believed we would be able to help Ilya to contend with his learning disabilities successfully, no matter the bumps in the road or how long it might take.

Dr. Federici had written a book about children with backgrounds like Ilya's, which I read. He titled it, "Help for the Hopeless Child." Now I could believe his message more than ever, that where others might see a hopeless child emerge from years of institutionalization and developmental disabilities, we could and should remain hopeful. We could definitely help this child and I was so grateful and so happy for my son.

8

## Toy Soldiers 2000

Like so many boys his age, Ilya ended up getting small plastic toy soldiers to play with, some grey, some olive green, a few tan or brown, molded into action poses brandishing rifles, throwing grenades, or running into battle. Often the soldiers arrived with excess plastic stuck to them from the molds, thin flat pieces clinging to an arm, a leg or a helmet, waiting for a child to peel them off. I had played with them as a child myself, having grown up in a military town.

Most of the houses on the street that I grew up on were home to families of enlisted soldiers, a couple officers or former military who were now employed as civilians on base. Most of my friends intended to grow up and join the military too, so we played with toy soldiers frequently and became life-sized soldiers ourselves in the nearby woods that became the scene of numerous battles, the ping of our cap guns sounding out just before one of us would yell out victoriously, “I got you,” followed by the inevitable, “no, you didn’t! I was behind the tree!”

The first time I saw Ilya with toy soldiers was the first time I had really seen them in many years. He received them as a gift. When I saw them in his hands, I was suddenly overwhelmed with fear. I took them away from him immediately, told him that he couldn’t play with them, that I would get him something else. He looked too stunned to protest. He just looked at me confused. He said nothing, instead he just went off to find something else to play with.

I didn’t know at first why I did it. It was frightening to be so unsure why I would do something, especially something that disrupted my child and his innocent play. I didn’t feel in control of myself. Something was happening inside of me and I had a sense that I knew what it was but simply could not face it in the moment. So, I went to see my therapist Nancy. After telling her what happened with Ilya, she dimmed the lights and had me lie down, suggesting that I should close my eyes too.

*Tell me what you saw, in your mind, when Ilya was playing with the toy soldiers,* she said.

I repeated what I had already told her. *Now, close your eyes and tell me how you feel,* she said.

*I’m afraid. I’m very afraid,* I said.

*What are you afraid of, Michael,* she asked?

*I don’t know,* I replied, turning to look at her, then fixing my vision on a painting straight ahead.

*Close your eyes, Michael, it will help,* she instructed me. Once I did that, she continued, *you don’t have to be afraid any longer. You are safe here. You can tell me what is scaring you.*

*I’m afraid of the man. He is in my mouth. His penis is in my mouth,* I replied.

I told her that when Ilya had the toy soldiers, I had seen in my mind the man with the gun to my head, his knife to my throat, the man with his penis out, me bound to a stairwell. I had played with toy soldiers with his son, who was several years older than me, in the back yard just outside the entrance to their basement.

The first day it happened, I was peddling my bike hard up a steep hill on my way home when the chain popped off the front sprocket. I crashed to the pavement. My right arm took the brunt of the fall. Even as I fell, the bike kept moving forward, scraping my forearm and elbow across the asphalt. The wound was deep and long, and blood poured from it. I had been riding alone, but I knew the neighbors nearby, not very well, but well enough to feel that I could knock on their door for a bandage.

The man opened the door and told me to come in when he saw me, smiling, motioning me to follow him. I felt awkward walking in. I hesitated for a few seconds, looking back and forth between his face and the blood oozing through my fingers to drip from my arm. I was worried about the carpet. Mommy would never let us walk on the carpet with our shoes on. What if my blood dripped on the neighbor's carpet and left a stain? There was nowhere to put my shoes. My father had tiled the front entrance at our house so we could sit down on the bench there and put our shoes underneath. As an adult, I had Ilya and Sarah follow the same rule, though not quite as rigidly as my mother did.

The next thing I remember I was in the neighbor's basement, bound at my wrists and ankles to a stairwell, my naked body spread wide open. I was being raped, before I even knew what that word meant. I tried to bite him. He smacked my face. Hard. And he was screaming and smiling at me all at once, enjoying the torture.

His teenaged son took his turn with me next, while he went back upstairs. "It's o.k. Me and my dad do this all the time." He fucked my head some more. I choked some more. Then there were heavy footsteps on the wooden stairs above me. He was coming back. He had a pistol and a knife. If I told, I'd be killed, the barrel next to my forehead. If I didn't come back, I'd be killed, the blade biting at my throat.

Nancy would eventually explain to me that what I experienced was common among child sex abuse survivors, overwhelming, vivid flashbacks, where the past folded into the present, the passage of time losing any meaning, as we relived that past as if it was in the present, hardly able to distinguish what was real in the moment from what was echoing from the past. She explained that adult survivors like me were often triggered into the flashbacks when we became parents and especially when our children reached the age we were when we were first abused. We could be triggered by anything that we associated with the abuse, the smell of a perpetrator's cologne, a particular color, someone who looks like the abuser. Or in my case, a distinct toy that I associated with him.

I was seven when I was raped, the same age Ilya was when I took his toy soldiers away. From that day forward, if it had not already done so, it impacted how I raised him, how fervently I sought to protect him from harm. And Ilya would always be, to me, the person who I loved enough and



needed so much to protect, that I was forced in a moment to face my horrific past, a process that would take years.

9

## The Past in the Present 2002 - 2003

By the time Ilya turned nine, I was raising him as a single parent. My marriage had failed. And the conflicts between Ilya and his mother were acute and getting worse, so I bought a townhouse and took him with me. I quit my full-time job as a litigator and returned to work in my best friend's civil litigation law firm as a contractor working largely on projects, rather than taking responsibility for whole cases. I was paid by the hour so I could set my own schedule and have complete flexibility to pick Ilya up from school each day, take him to medical and therapy appointments, take him to soccer practice, whatever he needed. I worked largely when he was in school and at night after he was asleep.

The routine of our lives was defined by our shared passions, for soccer, for hours spent building with Legos, for movies, for eating out, for practical jokes and pranks daily, and laughter. With Sarah, who lived with us part time, we spent rainy days in the mall, making a game of hiding dozens of pennies in plain sight from one end of the mall to the other, then circling back to try find them again before others found them and picked them up. We never found them all. And we devoured "Dolce Family Nachos" for dinner and cereal for breakfast with ice cream in place of milk.

Our home was a sanctuary, it felt. We cut a hole into the side of our staircase to build a fort beneath the steps, installed a light and filled the space with cushions and blankets and toys. It became a quiet space that Ilya retreated into regularly even into his teenaged years. Some nights, after Ilya was in bed, I would crawl under the stairs to spend time there too.

We went to our church sanctuary every week. Ilya became a student in my Sunday school class in the fourth and fifth grades that I taught. He embraced the church and followed my lead in serving the community that was became home to us, serving as an altar boy as soon as he was old enough.

All the while, I would step out of our lives once a week and go see Nancy. She continued to help me to look deeper into my abusive past, trying to understand better how it was still impacting me in the present. I joined support groups that she recommended also, both in person and on-line, of other survivors, and filling out exercises in workbooks and journaling about all aspects of what I had been through. For a time, Ilya had a regular sitter also, on Monday nights so that I could spend a full evening writing.

Nancy told me eventually that she could see I was improperly blaming myself for what was done to me, assigning an adult's abilities to myself as that little child who was bound and raped by a grown man.

*You didn't even understand what was being done to you, she said, it wasn't your fault. Think of your own little boy, he's even a few years older now than you were then. Would you expect that he could fight off a grown man, one with a gun and a knife?*

*Of course not, I replied.*

*It's ok, Michael, it's ok, it wasn't your fault, and you are safe now, she said.*

She was right, I could see. I was blaming myself and I would never believe that a child like my son would be able to escape the manipulations and physical power of a grown man, a predator, especially one armed with deadly weapons.

I understood the logic of it, but I knew that emotionally I had not moved beyond the self-blame. The trauma symptoms were still controlling me, causing me to be overly protective of my children, on constant guard for the worst that might happen to them almost to a point of paranoia. I was still regularly triggered into abject fear, flashbacks and lived with a lot of anxiety. I had to know why I still felt that way, my emotions defying what to me as an adult now was common sense. I struggled with it for a long time until I came to the realization that, to understand it, I would have to confront what I had learned when I was abused, how it impacted how I saw myself and others and our world from that moment forward.

I thought about it for a long time but putting myself back into that moment of my childhood was something that I resisted. It was not a place that I wanted to go, even though I was still very much stuck there. The day came when I simply had to get really honest with myself and write down all that I believed being sexually abused had taught me as a child, the lessons I carried with me into adulthood. That day came after I prepared to kill myself, for a third time, in my grief and confusion. It was the first time that I actually took into my hands a tool to kill myself, my son's medications, his clonidine and Adderall.

The fact was, I was living a life of secret despair and fear. Most who knew me could see my professional success and my joy and pride in my life with my children. I had told only a few people what had been done to me as a child, my therapist and just a few others. The first time I prepared to kill myself was years earlier. It was to be a truck on a busy roadway that I would throw myself in front of, leaving others to speculate on whether it was an accident or on purpose. I had my hand on the handle of the front door to leave home for the last time. In my mind I could see the fear finally released from its cage of flesh and bone, smashed open by the fury of metal. Its screams would finally be overpowered by the shriek of brakes and horns.

But the delicate sound of baby Sarah's voice caused me to slide my hand off the doorknob. *This can't be the last time she sees her daddy*, I said to myself. I lifted her up from the floor midway through her crawl and placed her in her crib later that night, grateful to still be with her, then looked in on her brother in the bedroom next door to hers, finding myself unable to imagine him standing alone, without a parent, again.

But there was still for me no peace, no serenity, no safety.

The fear persisted, burning from the inside out. Shards of memories returned, one by one gouging at my soul, trying to drown me in my own blood. I numbed my mind, deliberately depriving it of oxygen and sleep, desperately trying to muffle the screams inside. But it did not work. It wouldn't leave me alone. No matter how I tried to hide, no matter how I tried to focus on the good of the present, the horrifying past continued to find me, the terror and the pain stabbing without mercy until time meant nothing. I existed in my past unable to embrace the hope of the present. At once, it was everywhere, and it was nowhere. They were always there, those who so mercilessly attacked my body and soul, lurking constantly. The fear they infused into me would not go away.

The fear was in my recurring nightmare, where the footsteps on the stairs echoed over and over and over in my head, while the giant knife raced through the air of the room that had no windows or doors, chasing me around and around and around in circles until I finally woke up, bolt upright, out of breath and shaking.

The fear was in the hallucinations of him or his son standing there next to me, looking angry when I tried to kiss another, or him behind the door, or him sitting in car next to me, even when I tried to smash my hand through his chest, only to pull it out dripping with bloody flesh as he laughed at me at the top of his lungs, impervious to my punches.

The fear was there when I awoke and found him in my bed, in the texture of pillow that was the same as that sofa in his basement. I had to throw the pillow away.

The fear was in the color gray, the color of the walls of that basement.

The fear was there when I couldn't stand in a crowded elevator without panic rushing up from my gut to my brain and almost making me pass out.

The fear was there whenever I walked into a room with only men and was afraid to stay.

The fear was in how I hugged anyone but my children with only one arm, afraid to embrace another for real.

It was there when I pushed away a loving touch, no matter how I yearned for it.

The fear was there whenever I met new people and distrusted them before they did anything at all. I was trying to figure out what their hidden agenda might be.

It was there when I wanted help but could not find the trust to accept it from another.

The fear was there when someone raised their voice, making me cower inside myself.

It was there when I couldn't look at my own children without fearing for their safety, no matter how safe they were in the moment.

The fear was there when I compulsively checked and rechecked doors that I knew were locked.

The fear stole the breath from my throat whenever I saw anyone who looked like him, or his son.

They were simply always there, so I never felt safe.

So, when I sat down to write what all of what that experience had taught me as a child, I was in a psychiatric hospital half the country away from my home and my children. It was more than twenty years after I had been abused. To go there, I had to leave Ilya behind for a while. He was ten. This time it was the image in my mind's eye of the horror of him finding out that his father was dead from his medicines that got me to call for help, from my best friend, Don, who drove over right away and took the pills away from me. He then took me to his house to sleep and then followed me the next morning as I drove to Nancy's.

Nancy said it was time to go get intensive help. She told me it was time to go to a hospital.

Before I left home for the hospital, I called a long-time friend of mine from college, Mark, who had spent a lot of time with us. Ilya liked him a lot. I explained to Mark that the flashbacks had become more than I could bear, that it felt like I was losing my mind and was no longer in control. I was even starting to hallucinate.

Mark didn't even wait for me to ask to help with Ilya, he just responded as if I had asked. *It's no problem, Miguel*, he said, using his typical nickname for me, *I can move in and be you for a while. I'll take good care of The Boy*, he said, using my typical nickname for Ilya.

I hugged Ilya harder the day I left for the hospital than I had ever before. We had not been apart for any lengthy period of time and this time I didn't even know how long I would be gone. I kissed his forehead and prayed inside that I would return a stronger parent for him than ever before.

When I arrived at the hospital, I was ushered inside. The door was locked behind me. As I sat where I was told to wait for a nurse to take my vitals and give me a room, another patient approached me.

"Hi, I'm Tony. Your first time in?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "You have that look. Don't worry, it's safe here. It's the best hospital I've been in."

If I had seen him on the street somewhere, I would have crossed to the other side. He looked frightening to me. He was muscular, tattooed, shaved, pierced, leathered and booted, though with no laces. Those were banned on the ward for safety reasons. You could tie them together and hang yourself with laces.

But there was kindness and compassion in Tony's voice, and in his smile and in his eyes. I saw too that he was in pain, tremendous pain. It showed just beneath his tough exterior. Seeing his pain, like I was feeling, helped me to trust in him, that day, and in the weeks that followed when he spoke to me about his past and the tears began to flow down his rugged face. So, I could talk to him and believe in what he shared. I drew strength most from the defiance in his voice as he explained one of his largest tattoos, Christ crucified, covering half his leg. *When Satan comes, I want him to see who I belong to*, he said.

Tony earned my trust quickly for how alike his struggle was to mine, but my mistrust of others, especially men, remained. Aside from Tony, I only spoke to women on the ward in the beginning. I was assigned a therapist the second day. The nurse told me his name and said I would see him right after lunch. I didn't want him before I even met him, though. He was a man and I only wanted a female therapist. I told the nurse this.

*I'm sorry, she said, the female therapists have a full caseload already.*

*But I was raped by a man, I don't like to talk to men, I explained.*

*I'm sorry, she repeated, I do understand, but I just don't have any female therapists available. But he's a really good therapist, you'll like him.*

*No, I won't, I thought, but it looked like I had no choice.*

When I met him, thankfully, he was not physically imposing. More tall and lanky than anything else. He shook my hand and invited me into a little office just off the main living area of the ward. I entered and sat down right next to the door. The room had little space for anything other than our two chairs and his desk. The door in was the only door and there were no windows. He flipped open a manilla folder. I saw my photo, taken the day I arrived, stapled to the inside cover. Several pages of paper were clipped inside. He started to flip through them and looked up at me. He started to speak but cut himself off. "Sorry," he said, rising from his chair to close the door.

I looked over my left shoulder at the closed door. As soon as he sat back down, I reached out and flipped the handle to open the door again.

He looked at me for a moment, perhaps trying to figure out if I was trying to be funny.

"Is something wrong," he asked?

"Yes, you're a man and I'm not comfortable in a room with just a man. Especially a room with no windows," I said.

"It's just for your privacy," he said, "anyone walking by will be able to hear us. But it's up to you," he said.

"I don't care about my privacy. If the door is closed, I will be on the other side of it," I replied.

"Ok, no problem. If you change your mind, we can close it again."

I stared at him for a moment, feeling like I was challenging him just for the sake of it. "I won't."

"Ok. So, why are you here," he asked?

I was confused. "They didn't tell you, it's not in the folder," I asked back?

“Well, yes, it is, actually,” he said, allowing himself a slight chuckle, “but I wanted to hear from you, in your words, why you felt the need to be here.”

I turned my body halfway away from him, twisting in my chair towards the doorway. I looked out and focused on the sofas and chairs.

“I want to kill myself, but I have kids,” I said.

“Why do you want to kill yourself,” he asked?

“I was molested as a kid,” I said, “the flashbacks are overwhelming. I can’t stop them. I’m seeing shit that’s not even there and I can’t take it anymore. I fucking saw him behind the bedroom door here just last night. I thought he was real. He felt real. I couldn’t stay in the room. I slept in the quad. I want to die. I don’t know how to make it stop.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, “and I want you to live for your kids, but for yourself too. You can’t just live for someone else, not even your child.”

“I want to get better. I just don’t know how.”

“We will do all we can here to help you. But you seem motivated. That should help a lot.”

He spent some time asking more about my life, about my work and what I did with the kids. Then he switched to what we were going to work on. The first part of healing, he told me, was understanding the depth of my injury. It was more than simply admitting that I had become a danger to myself, it was about seeing who I really was.

Who I was became clearer to me after I met with him the next day and he asked me to read what he wrote about me. It was a list, his simple evaluation of my “strengths,” the things he thought I could rely on in the healing journey I was embarking on. I was surprised to read that I even had any significant strength, especially what he saw in me.

He wrote, “He has survived trauma.” But I didn’t see myself as a survivor. I didn’t feel like I was surviving anything. I was in front of him because I felt so devastated that I was all but ready to destroy myself, even if that meant leaving my beloved children behind.

He wrote also, “He has a strong spiritual connection.” I didn’t believe that I had a particularly spiritual connection, and I didn’t really understand how a connection like that would help anyway. The God that I knew, the God of my childhood, was an authority figure, one to be feared from a distance. The man who raped me was an authority figure too. He wore the uniform of a U.S. Army officer. To me, God was, first and foremost, judgmental and condemning. God was all-powerful and would just as soon punish me as do anything else with me. My goal with God was not to be offensive for fear of the consequences.

The counselor probably wrote about a spiritual connection, I figured, because I was carrying a Bible and told him that I taught Sunday school. I carried that Bible though not because I had any real faith in it, but because it felt like it was all that I had left from my childhood, the one thing my mother left with me when she died that was truly her. It felt comforting, even though I never seemed to make a connection with it that compared to the faith she showed in her life. I continued to do what she taught me, praying, speaking about God, and not just on Sundays. But the God she introduced me to, was a man too.

In the days and weeks that followed the counselor's assessment of my strengths though, I continued to carry it as I confronted my past, digging up all of the emotions and horrific memories that brought me to this place.

In time, the therapist asked me why it took so long for me to disclose what happened to me. Why didn't I, as a child, tell my father or my mother what happened to me? Why didn't I go to them for help? And I would answer spontaneously that my father was "irrelevant" in my moment of greatest need. I did not tell him what the neighbors did because he was absent even when he was there. He never created a safe place emotionally for me to go to him as a child. And I feared my mother whenever I believed that I had done something wrong, like going into the rapist's house without her permission.

As the days passed, it felt like someone was taking over for me, like the pages of the Bible always seemed to open to something I needed to know or be reassured was true whenever I flipped it open. Angels, I felt in my desperation, were turning the pages for me. As I arrived and met Tony and the others, it opened to, "Two are better than one ... For if they fall, one will lift up his companion." I had always struggled against my fears alone and that was lonely place to be. Now I had companions.

Next, I read, "Bow down Your ear, O Lord, hear me; For I am poor and needy." So I began to speak to my God, awkwardly at first, until the counselor insisted that I find a safe place in my heart where I could go when the pain and fear overwhelmed me. "You can't do anything else here until you find that place, Michael," he said. The next day, in Psalm 23, I found that place, a place where my God would be my shepherd, in the valley of the shadow of death, where green grass and quiet waters stilled my tortured soul. It was a place where the monsters could not reach me. I was able to picture them in the distance, unable to cross into the field where I lay, my children gathered beside me. The monsters were beaten back when they tried by my Shepherd's rod and staff.

Then I found myself in the middle of the hospital, moving and dancing among my companions as the music at first raged around us, and then gradually diminished to softness. The lights dimmed low while we made our way to the floor to rest. And there, as I sat on the ground, the grief of decades began to flow out. The wailing trapped inside me for so long was released with unrelenting tears, not destroyed with flesh ripping from bone by howling metal, not silenced with medication twisted open into death. I pushed the tissues away, so grateful to feel the tears burning on my cheeks. So grateful not to feel ashamed of how I felt. So grateful not to feel afraid. Finally, a moment of living peace.



As I continued to grieve in the days that followed, I felt that the angels opened up my book one more time, from where I learned to pray, “To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven ... a time to heal ... a time to weep .. a time to mourn ...” Now it was time to gather stones and to tear and to speak and to hate. It was time to turn the rage within outwards, towards those who hurt me.

My companions were constantly by my side and paying attention, looking for moments to help even if I did not ask.

“No child would write with something like that. Your child needs to heal, not your grown up.” I looked at the ink pen in my hand. My fellow patient was right. I put it down, got some crayons from the cabinet and sat back down to write.

“No child would write on that kind of paper.” I looked at the plain white, lined paper on the table. She was right again. I slid it aside and went back to the cabinet. I got some construction paper, some yellow and some orange, and sat back down again. I started writing. I was supposed to write what I was angry about, I told her.

After a few minutes, she spoke again. “You don’t look very angry.”

“I’m not feeling it,” I said.

“Are you right-handed?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Then put the crayon in your left hand,” she told me.

A minute later, anger rushed through the veins into my hand. I began to scrawl across the pages, quickly and uncontrollably, in big letters, like a child.

I am angry at you because you hurt me!

I am angry at you because you scared me!

I am angry at you because you were mean and yelled!

I am angry because you got your gun out!

I am angry at you because you said you would kill me!

I am angry at you because you wouldn’t let me go!

I am angry at you because you said it would be o.k. and it wasn’t!

I am angry at you because you took my clothes off!

I am angry at you because you tied me up!

I am angry at you because you tricked me!

I am angry at you because you stuck your tinkler in my mouth!

I was only a child. I was only a child. I was only a child.

How could you?

You monster.

I allowed myself to be angry at the monster for the first time since I bit him. I was ready for the bat that the counselor had waited to give to me, and I began to beat my anger into the punching bag.

Next, the time came in my treatment to move beyond words and touch my pain, manipulate it in my hands, and figure out what I had to do with it, how to control it, for the first time. I was given sticky clay, the color of the walls of the basement where I had been brutalized. I molded it into the images that haunted me, twisting and smashing them with my fists again and again before lowering my trembling hands into the sink to rinse away the clay, scrubbing the images off my hands, reducing them to mud that disappeared down the drain.

After the clay, I made crude drawings of the monsters and of the feelings that they left me with. Then I ripped the pages to shreds, lifting the pieces up to my God as an offering. I flung them into the air, scattering them all around me. *Take this pain, my Lord. I give over this suffering to You.*

I was feeling empowered by all that I was experiencing in the hospital, alongside the others who truly understood what I was going through, because it had been their walk too. So, as I sat in the hospital after a group therapy session with other survivors of child sex abuse, I felt ready to step far back into my past, to ask myself what I truly learned as a little boy, when I was raped. Another survivor and a therapist at the hospital urged me to make my list, to really disclose as openly and honestly as possible what I believed I learned when I was bound and raped before I was even old enough to know what sex was, let alone rape.

I sat down in the main living area of the ward, a large room filled with groups of chairs and sofas and coffee tables. I slid down to sit on the carpeted floor between an overstuffed pale brown sofa and wooden coffee table. I had a stack of plain blank paper in front of me, with a pen, and a cup of milk I had heated up in the microwave in the kitchen. Before picking up the pen to write, I put my hand on my Bible, closed my eyes, and prayed for the strength to be honest with myself and to write an honest list. I prayed for insight, that the list would be complete. I opened my eyes, took up the pen, and began to write.

I wrote that the summer I was raped, more than once eventually, I learned what evil looked like, my friend on top of me on the sofa, pinning my ankles down with his hands, the weight of his body

and his legs holding the rest of me down, while the man sat in the corner, smiling again, jerking off as I was raped and simultaneously made to rape my friend.

That summer, I learned to hate the game Twister. It's only fun if you have your clothes on.

That summer I learned that the world was not safe.

I learned that men were dangerous.

I learned that I had to stay away from other people to be safe.

I learned that people I trusted would hurt me.

I learned that if I tried to escape, I would be overpowered.

I learned that I could not be angry, or I would be hurt more.

I learned not to trust my own judgment.

I learned that I couldn't keep myself safe.

I learned that people would use me and not care when I was afraid.

I learned that I was vulnerable and weak and not strong enough to defend myself.

I learned to withdraw from the real world because it hurt too much.

Mommy had a rule, don't go into someone else's house without getting her permission first, and since I was always punished for breaking her rules, I believed that she would punish me for going into that house and I didn't want to be dead either, so I didn't tell her what happened. And so, I learned that I was not allowed to be cared for when I was hurt.

I learned that I was sinful because she had told me that it was sin if I didn't respect her rules. God would punish me for sinning, she said, so I learned that I caused my own pain and destruction. Mommy was right, God's punishment was so incredibly severe and more than I could handle, so I learned to fear my God.

I learned to be afraid of guns, like the one pressed to my head.

At the end of it, I wrote that the list of what I learned that summer had "crushed me." I stared in disbelief at the list clasped in my hand, inches from my face as I lay curled up in a fetal position on the carpet, unable to move as I faced just how much that one man and one moment in time had changed who I was, how I saw myself and the world, and how much I related to other people from a place of fear and distrust.

The damage done in a few moments had lasted for all of the years that had passed already, but I was still too afraid to cry. I still had not even said his name out loud, not once in over twenty years. He was just “my perpetrator,” and I even hated when I said it that way because it sounded like something I wanted or at least owned, like “my shoes,” or was a part of me that wouldn’t go away, like “my nose.”

But now I understood so much better the pain and the fear that I had lived with for decades. It was more than having lost my mother, at thirteen, having watched her slowly die from the ravages of cancer.

It was more than enduring the bitch my father married the year after she died, whose teenage daughter sexually abused my little brother in her bedroom, spelling out “Jon is sexy” on her wall with little alphabet stickers. He was nine, she was sixteen. My protests were squashed, me admonished for disrupting family harmony.

It was more than watching my father go to prison on the eve of my adulthood, arrested by the FBI for espionage, the story spread across news headlines nationwide that he stole secrets for years from his work as a weapons analyst at Aberdeen Proving Grounds and delivered them to military attaches of the apartheid South African government. It was the culmination of years of the racist vitriol he spewed regularly, persisting over my mother’s vocal objections as the one dispute she ever had with him in my presence. He persisted, alongside his rants of conspiracy theories that communists had infiltrated the government, parroted from his membership in the ultra-conservative John Birch Society.

Not even knowing of the sexual abuse that I suffered, one high school teacher who heard of all this other trauma I endured as a child said that I was dealt “an unusually cruel hand of cards.” But truly none of those things had terrorized my soul to its depths the way that “my perpetrator” did. All the rest I was able to live through and find my way out the other side. Those things happened around me, not to me. So, as I drove away from the hospital weeks later, in my mind I was focused on something that Tony stressed again and again in our time together, something he did in his recovery. We should try to see even the bad for the good that it does for us. That would help us, he said, to “redefine” the bad that happens to us in life, even if it was just focusing on what we learned from it.

My hand of cards, I came to see it, gave me particular empathy for Ilya, for the cruel hand of cards he was dealt at birth and in his early years of life. When I adopted him, as much as there were stark differences in our early lives, I knew what it was like to lose a parent and I knew what it was like to live through a traumatic childhood. I was determined to give him better than he had, to spare him more trauma and to give him a chance to be a kid.

As a child, I had often prayed just that I would grow up soon, telling my God that, “I’ll make a better grown up than a kid.” I didn’t want Ilya ever to pray that prayer.

10

Thy Will  
2004

Dolce's tried for years to get the legislature to do away with the statute of limitations in cases where a child under the age of 16 was sexually molested. The former legislative aide has a personal interest in seeing the law passed, one that he shared with a spellbound [Florida] Senate Criminal Justice Committee this afternoon struggling to hear the soft-spoken Dolce's testimony. Dolce, an attorney, prayed silently before telling the committee that he was repeatedly raped as a 7-year-old child by a neighbor in his home state of Maryland.

*The Palm Beach Post*, March 9, 2010

When I returned home from the hospital, I wanted to be more mindful of how my past was impacting my present, especially how it might be affecting my children. I knew that I did not want to live in fear of child predators any longer, to feel controlled by them. But at the same time, it felt more important than ever to make sure that Ilya and Sarah enjoyed childhood without any of the trauma I had suffered, that they grew up as they should, gradually, not shocked into adulthood. So, I found myself still very protective of their safety, taking steps most parents would likely find overly protective, even unnecessary. At least, I did not see others doing what I was doing. As much as I didn't want to be controlled by my fear, I still knew that the fear was rooted in truth. There were monsters in the world, lurking in wait for the opportunity to victimize a child.

Some precautions to keep them from finding an opportunity with my children still felt appropriate to me, like the rule we had in any store or shopping mall, the rule my children knew well by then, that if dad couldn't reach out and touch you, you were too far away. I would call out regularly, "I can't reach you," and they would draw closer or stop walking so I could catch up.

My first weekend home, I took Ilya and Sarah to a restaurant for breakfast. It had been a Saturday morning tradition for us and it felt good to be back. I needed to go to the bathroom as we waited for our order. Usually, I remembered to go before we left home, to avoid this problem. On that day, the bathroom was about as far away from our table as it could be. Ilya was ten. Sarah was six. I didn't want to leave them alone at the table. I feared someone would abduct one of them, scanning the room for anyone who looked suspicious, who might be paying too close attention to my children. But Sarah was getting too old to take to the men's room with me and I couldn't just take Ilya and leave her.

The restaurant was crowded. I tried to reassure myself that if anything happened, someone who act to protect my children. I thought about asking someone nearby to watch them for me, but they were strangers and I feared asking an unknown predator for help. After all, "my predator" was a trusted, respected member of the community who showed no signs of risk to others.

*Ilya, I said, I have to go to the bathroom. You're in charge of your sister until I get back.*

*Ok, Dad, he said, a delighted smile across my face as he looked at Sarah as if to say, “Finally, I’m in charge of you.”*

*I cut his delight short. And Sarah, I said, you’re in charge of your brother until I get back.*

*Ok, Dad, she chuckled, looking at her brother who started to laugh too.*

*Seriously, though, I said, if anyone tries to take you, you have to scream as loud as you can and I will run right back to you.*

*Ok, they both assured me.*

*Before I rose, I asked, what are you going to do if someone pulls out a gun and says they will shoot you if you scream?*

*They looked back and forth at each other, neither of them coming up with an answer.*

*Scream anyway, I instructed, no matter what, don’t let them get you out the door.*

*I rushed into the bathroom and back out, not even stopping to dry my hands. I just wiped them on my pants. Seeing them safely across the dining room at the table made me sigh with relief.*

*At my next therapy appointment with Nancy, I told her I needed help finding a safe middle ground between what felt like “paranoia,” though she called it hyper-vigilance, and doing what was truly necessary to keep my children safe. I didn’t find a resolution that day. The comfortable space I wanted eluded me. But as our session neared its end, Nancy asked if I had a few minutes more to speak to her assistant about a personal issue.*

*I think you can help her, she said, no, actually, I know you can help her, she said, brimming with her usual confidence, a broad smile crossing her face.*

*Of course, I will speak with her. Anything for you, Nancy, I said.*

*She invited Patty into the room, dimly lit but filled with bright colored furniture, purples and pinks and greens. I had only exchanged brief pleasantries with Patty when checking in for my appointments or paying at the end. Patty sat down on the opposite end of a sofa from me, while Nancy returned to her usual chair off to our side. She started by thanking me for taking the time to talk with her as her usual pleasant smile began to fade. She looked to one side, instead of at me, as she told me what had happened. Her son, Jeff, took karate classes as child, along with two of his best friends.*

*I didn’t know what was really going on, she told me. The karate instructor was molesting the boys, she told me, tears filling her eyes.*

*Jeff didn’t tell me until he was all grown up, she said, I never even suspected anything was wrong, she said. By now she was crying openly.*

*Then Jeff and his two friends went to the police, she explained, but they were told it was too late, the statute of limitations had expired. The detective said she believed them, but all she could do was wait for the next victim, hoping the next one would be on time.*

*We have to change this law, Patty pleaded with me. It was too much for my son, she told me. On Christmas Eve, Jeff put a bullet where it hurt most, in his heart.*

Patty wept, and we cried along with her.

*I can't imagine your loss, Patty, I said. I'm so sorry about your son. I have children. I don't even want to imagine anything like that happening to them. It's unthinkable.*

Nancy spoke next. *I told Patty that you worked in the state Senate and had changed some laws already for children.*

*Yes, I will do all that I can to help, Patty. I stopped working there about two years ago, but I can get the law changed. I know how to do that. I worked in the legislature for four years, I told her.*

*Thank you, she said, please, I don't want Jeff to have died in vain. He can't have died in vain.*

As I drove home, I knew that Jeff was one of many child sex abuse victims who waited years to disclose what was done to them. I had waited some two decades. I had met so many others in treatment and in support groups who spoke up and sought help from law enforcement only to find the courthouse doors locked. That left so many predators on the streets to hunt their next prey as the police waited for the next inevitable victim.

The solution seemed to obvious and easy to achieve, simply repeal the statutes of limitation for those cases. Put kids first and predators last. Who would oppose that? Besides, I knew my way around the state legislature. I had worked there as an aide to a prominent state senator, Skip Campbell, who was still in office. Together Skip and I had overseen passage of more than one piece of legislation for the welfare of children, including reform of the entire private adoption law chapter to make adoptions more secure and we reformed foster care statutes to make the system work better for foster children. So, I thought, it was just time to write a new bill, get it sponsored by Senator Campbell, and get the job done. The state would be safer for everyone's kids, including mine. I felt empowered in the moment.

I called Skip when I got home. I told him about my meeting with Patty and her son Jeff Smith's story and, for the first time, my own story of abuse. *Our children are simply not as safe as they can be*, I told Skip, himself a parent of young children and he was an adoptive parent too. When I was done, he needed no encouragement to sponsor the bill. *Let's do it, Michael. Get it into bill drafting and find me a House sponsor*, he said. I had heard that directive a few dozen times before when I was on his staff. It felt good to hear it again.



After the bill was filed, Skip called me. *I got some calls about the bill. There's some opposition,* he said, *let's try to work with them. We'll get it into committee and see what amendments they want.* The criminal defense lawyers and the Catholic Church were opposed, he told me.

A few months later, the bill was scheduled for its first hearing, in the Senate Criminal Justice committee. I told Ilya I was going on a mission to make the world safer for children like him and his sister. *I'll be back before you know it, just two days,* I told him. I dropped him off at his mother's house and drove the four hundred miles from West Palm Beach to Tallahassee to testify.

The final ninety miles of the drive to the capital is west down Interstate 10, a sparsely populated, largely agricultural part of the state. There is little to see along the highway, aside from thick woods of tall trees interspersed between expanses of farmland with occasional patches of cows. It is easy to get lost in thought on the drive. As I drove it, I dwelled on what lay ahead and the closer I got to the capital, the more petrified I became.

I had drafted a statement to read to the committee. It was long. I outlined why the criminal defense bar and the Catholic Church were wrong to oppose the bill. I explained how the bill would lock up more child sex predators. I had all the data researched, snapped into a binder in my briefcase. I wrote in my statement how the average survivor delayed fifteen years before disclosing what was done to them, meaning in real terms that some seventy percent of cases were like Jeff's, the police handcuffed to do anything about known sex abusers. And I wrote in my story how long it took me to disclose what happened to me and why it took so long. My committee appearance would be my first public disclosure that I was raped as a child.

In my growing fear of what I intended to disclose, I kept reassuring myself. *You have survived worse. You have to do to this. For your children, for all children. They have to be made safer. Get the predators off the street. Patty's son cannot have died in vain. Your story will mean something. You know most of these Senators from when you worked there. They will listen to you.*

When I entered the Capitol building the next morning, I felt myself trembling and I just wanted to turn around and leave. So, I went first to the chapel on the first floor to try to ground myself. I was alone in the small room. It was dimly lit, with padded benches on either side of the room and a non-descript alter in the middle. I placed my briefcase aside me on the floor, sat on the bench and leaned forward, closing my eyes and folding my hands together in prayer.

I prayed first that my children were well while I was gone. I prayed Psalm 23 several times. It calmed me somewhat. Then I paused, trying to figure what else I needed to pray. Then I continued, *If it is Your will Lord, let me be your voice here, let my voice bring change to the law to make children safer, make my children safer. May thy will, not mine, be done. Amen.*

With that, I left the chapel and went to see Skip in his office before we headed to the committee room. I approached the committee secretary with my appearance card. I knew her from when I worked there.

*Hey,* I asked her, *could you do me a favor?*

*Of course, Michael, she said.*

*Please put my card last in the pile. I want to be called last so I can respond to whatever the opponents say. I need the last word.*

*No problem, it's done, she replied, sliding my card to the bottom of the stack.*

I took a seat in the front row. The room filled up with dozens of lobbyists, most I knew or recognized from when I worked there. The senators soon entered and were seated on the dais. The chair called the meeting to order and reminded the room that there were several bills on the agenda so we needed to get going and keep testimony as efficient as possible.

When the bill was called, Senator Campbell briefly explained it to the committee. The chair asked for questions from the members. There were none, so he turned to the secretary for appearance cards. There were three of us. Two against the bill.

The Florida Public Defenders Association spoke first, their president taking the podium, speaking of how unfair it could be to defend against abuse claims years after the fact, how witness memories could fade and witnesses could even die or be too hard to find. Vote "no" on the bill, she asked them.

Next, a lobbyist for the Florida Catholic Conference spoke, saying the Church supported a change to the criminal laws, but not a change to the four year time limit on civil suits. My bill lifted the statute of limitations for both. Pass the bill, he said, and liability premiums for churches and schools will skyrocket, depriving the church of funds for its many good and important ministries.

When he was done, the secretary handed my appearance card to the chair. He announced, *We have one more card on the bill. Michael Dolce, in favor of the bill.* I approached the podium. I put my Bible on the top edge where the committee could see it. It was the Bible that I had carried around the hospital all those weeks.

*Mr. Dolce, you're recognized.*

My hands were shaking violently as I tried to straighten my papers. I gripped the sides of the podium to steady them. In my mind, I prayed, *I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me*, and then I started to speak.

I told them how most of my fellow survivors of child sex abuse delayed years before being able to report what was done to them, that in our terror and undeserved shame we needed time to heal before we could be expected to come forward. I told them how too often we then learned that there was nothing that could be done. The law would simply have to wait for the next victim and hope that victim found the courage to come forward in time, just like in Jeff's case. The police were waiting for the fourth victim, the community still at risk. I told the Committee that I knew all too well that many abusers were benefiting from their threatening tactics to silence their victims and I told them how I knew that.

And I blasted the Catholic Church's opposition to the bill. *This is my Bible*, I said, lifting it from the podium and holding it in the air. *I teach children Sunday school every week. All I need is this book and a bag of cheese puffs. I don't need liability insurance. And neither do they*, I said, pointing behind me towards the church's lobbyist. *Don't abuse kids and you won't need the insurance.*

I took too long when I spoke. I didn't know how to stop and I had written down so much. I was telling the stories of survivors I had met, all the data on how abuse hurts children. Senator Campbell had to cut me off. When I paused to turn a page, he said, "Michael, we're going to stop there."

"It's o.k.," he assured me and the room, "I think we have the votes."

I said I was sorry for talking so long. I returned to my seat. I felt people watching me but I could not look at them. I sat down and prayed, *may Thy will be done*, as the panel voted for the bill, eight to zero in favor of it. I mouthed "thank you" the committee as the chair moved on to the next bill on the agenda.

After the vote, I left the committee room and a reporter came up to me in the hallway. *Excuse, me, I'm with the Associated Press, how do you spell your last name?* I saw her press i.d. on a lanyard around her neck and a bag slung over her shoulder. She was holding a reporter's notebook in one hand, a pen in the other, poised to write. She looked at me expectantly.

*Why*, I asked?

*I'm writing a story about what you just said. It's compelling*, she replied.

*I'm not ready for this to be in the news*, I replied, *do you have to use my name?*

*You did just speak in public, and your name was announced*, she said.

*I know, but most of my family doesn't even know yet. My kids don't know. What if someone at school says something to them, our name is not that common?*

*You were very brave, I could see how hard it was for you, but again, you just said all that in public. I'd like to get your story out.* I stayed silent for a moment. She broke the silence. *O.k., I'll speak to my editor. Maybe we can run the story without your name.*

I drove the four hundred miles back to West Palm Beach and picked Ilya up.

*Did you win, Dad*, he asked me, as he got into the car?

*Yes, but there's more work left to do. And I need to tell you something.*

He was just ten years old. But I needed to be the one to tell him what happened to me, before my story ended up in the news and someone else did. Despite the Associated Press reporter's words

to me, I realized on the way home that any number of other reporters could have gotten my name when it was announced or just gotten it from the committee staff. The appearance cards were public record.

*I told you I'm trying to change the law, to protect you and Sarah and other kids from people who hurt them, I said, that's why I was gone for a couple days.*

Yep, he replied.

*I'm doing it help kids because something happened to me when I was a child, younger than you are now. Someone, a man, a neighbor where I grew up, really hurt me when I was a kid. You don't need to know the details. But we need to stop people like the one who hurt me, I said. So, I may have to go on some trips to Tallahassee to finish this work.*

Ok, Dad, he replied, *I understand. Glad you won.*

*Ilya, it might end up in the newspaper, what I say in Tallahassee. Someone at school might talk to you about it. They might talk to you about what happened to me when I was a kid. It was horrible what was done to me. Just know that I am ok now.*

*You're gonna be in the newspaper? That's cool,* he said.

*Yeah, that would be cool. But if anyone talks to you about it and you have any questions about what you hear, can you let me know?*

*Sure, Dad,* he said, *but you won, right? So, are we eating out for dinner?*

*Good idea, let's celebrate,* I replied, and turned the car to head towards a favorite Tex-Mex restaurant.

The legislation never made it through the remaining committees. The church's political clout stopped it from advancing. We would have to try again the next year.

11

Ilya Kicha  
2006

By the time Ilya was fifteen, we had gone together to countless appointments with special educators, psychologist and psychiatrists, probably over two hundred. Through it all, with all the pills he took daily, all the therapies, all the consultations, all the ideas, all the supportive services, I did not feel that his struggle to succeed had eased much at all. And neither had his pain as an adopted child.

Ilya always proudly identified himself to people he met as being a Russian. He told everyone that he was adopted, making sure that everyone knew that he had another family as well and another nation to claim as his own. He asked me to get him a Russian flag to hang on his bedroom wall, which we found at a shop in Miami, as well as a Russian national soccer team shirt for him to wear.

He continued to use whatever words he could of the language he left behind, now forgotten, taking the Russian language books that I had learned from off my bookshelf and putting them on his desk, picking up new words from time to time, though never being able to use it significantly. He shared it all with his friends from school and the neighborhood. Many called him, "The Russian," at his request.

The day came when he asked me the questions that I had anticipated for many years. *Dad, will you help me find my mother? And do I have brothers or sisters? I want to find them too.*

I told him that I thought he would ask me this one day and that I was glad he was comfortable asking for my help.

*Let's start by letting you know your birth name, I said, you were born Ilya Kicha.*

Then I told him what I knew of his birth family, including his mother's name. I told him that he had at least one and maybe two siblings, though I knew nothing more about them other than the fact that they were born before him. He was the third birth to his mother according to the hospital records I was shown at the orphanage, though identified as the second birth in another official record.

*You could have a brother or two, or a sister or two, or one of each, or just one sibling. I just don't know for sure, I told him, but I will certainly help you.*

I had often wondered about his sibling or siblings, the fact that we did not know their fate, that his mother may gone home to them when she left him behind at the hospital or perhaps, they were left behind too. But I didn't speculate with Ilya about it, feeling that it could be too painful, that he needed to be the one to bring up the questions if he needed to do that. The adoption agency had told me that Russian officials who handled adoptions were known to identify siblings who might

also be available for adoption, but they had said nothing to me about Ilya's siblings. So, odds were, if they were taken by the authorities and placed in an orphanage too, at least one of them would be available for adoption. Only about one in ten Russian orphans were ever adopted at that time. But there was no way of knowing for sure.

Ilya didn't ask me anything about his birth father. His father never came to the hospital for his son and his name was unknown to hospital officials, at least according to the records I was shown. His mother did not disclose the father's name to hospital officials, I was told. This too I didn't tell Ilya, waiting and wondering if he would ever ask. All I said to him was that I didn't know his birth father's name or anything else about him.

Having been born some nine weeks premature, weighing just three and a half pounds, Ilya was placed in an incubator, where his mother, Svetlana, abandoned him three days later, never having named him. She left the hospital without being detected, taking the medical records with her, depriving us of even knowing her age. His name, "Ilya," was chosen by the nurses in the hospital where he was born, in the city of Nahodka, about a three hour drive from Vladivostok.

So, this tiny child was named Ilya Alexandrovich Kicha on his Russian birth certificate. The patronymic assigned to him at birth in lieu of a middle name, consistent with Russian culture, was apparently that of his maternal grandfather, Alexander. I didn't tell him all these details either. I didn't think he was ready. So, I just told him that for unknown reasons his family couldn't take care of him, so he was placed in the orphanage where I met and adopted him.

I very purposefully left out some of the more painful details for the time being, being especially careful not to tell him that he was "abandoned" at the hospital and that he was named by nurses, not his mother. I knew that Ilya was in the hospital for over three months after birth. When he was strong enough to leave, he was transferred to the orphanage, called the Artem Baby Home. It was some 25 miles outside Vladivostok, the largest Russian port on the Pacific Ocean, home of the Russian Navy's Pacific Fleet, and terminus of the famed Trans-Siberian Railway. At over 5,700 miles, it was the longest railway in the world. I told Ilya these things about his first home and that he lived with about fifty other children at that orphanage until we met some four years later, which he remembered, he said.

When I adopted him, the Russian court changed his name to Ilya Dolce, giving him my last name and blotting out his maternal grandfather's name. Many people asked me if I wanted to re-name him when he arrived in the U.S., especially since his name was so uncommon in our society. Did I believe he would be better off with a name that fit in better, I was asked? No, was my answer, without hesitation, always.

I had seen this child leave literally everything behind. The only home he ever knew. The children who were his brothers and sisters. His language. Even his clothes, every item, including his underwear, had to be replaced. I was required to change him as we left the orphanage into clothes that I was told to bring with me. I wasn't allowed to trade or even buy from them what he already had on. His toys, which he shared with his friends, had to stay behind too. Only the teddy bear that I gave him when we first met in September was his to take with him. That bear, and his name, were all he carried with him as we walked out of the orphanage, as he hugged his many friends

and the nurses, and waved one last time before climbing into a waiting passenger van. I was not going to take his name from him. I gave him a middle name for our lifetime together though, Nicholas. He became Ilya Nicholas Dolce when his adoption was re-affirmed by a Florida court, the last of the paperwork that confirmed us as family.

So, the day he asked me to help him find his birth family, I was really glad that I kept his name. I couldn't imagine having to tell him then that he was born with a different first name, that he had lost that too.

I watched my son struggle through all that I did share with him about his past, his pained expression, the trickle of tears down his cheek, his body shifting back and forth for a comfortable position that he could not find. I felt helpless to ease his pain and growing confusion even in the face of new information about where he came from and who he left behind. Some of it was hard truth. His mother was apparently a chronic alcoholic. That, I told him, is probably one reason why he had disabilities. And I took the opportunity to explain to him that alcoholism could be hereditary, so as he got older, he should be extra careful about alcohol and even drugs.

All I felt I really could do for Ilya's pain was offer my unequivocal support for a journey to find answers, to seek to reconnect with a birth family he never knew and a nation that was simultaneously part of him but not anywhere near him. It felt that all I had to offer was inadequate. I would always be an outsider to his sense of loss, the center of his adopted family that simply never seemed to be enough to fill the void that he felt. He was all but alone with his struggle. Far more questions were left unanswered than were answered the day we opened the adoption file. And it was the important ones to Ilya that remained unanswered, it seemed.

Ilya had turned thirteen when he asked me to help him find his birth family. Perhaps something about becoming a teenager triggered in him the struggle over his adoption to a level that became especially hard for him. He had talked at school about being adopted and other kids had been less than kind, calling him a "foster kid," he told me, saying that he didn't have a "real family."

He was bringing up his birth family more and more often and said he wanted to go back to Russia as soon as he could. When, he asked me, could he return? I told him that I could not take him back until he was an adult, that he had to become eighteen first. But we could try to find his birth parents before then in other ways. I told him that we could search on the Internet, but not to get his hopes up yet. I pointed out that the language barrier could be real problem. I explained we would probably have to go in person to Russia to actually find them. But I assured him that he would have that right as an adult and I would be there with him as far as he wanted me to go.

The day he asked for me help, for all that we could not do, I wanted him to feel empowered to reach out then, in some way, to communicate to his family of origin. So, I made a suggestion to him. *Why don't you write them a letter? We can mail it as soon as we can find an address.*

He said that was a good idea. He sat down at the desk in his bedroom later that day and began to write. I left him alone, not wanting my presence to somehow influence what he would say, concerned that my being there might cause him to feel that he had to account for my feelings as he wrote. He emerged later and offered the letter to me.



*Do you want me to read this, I asked?*

*Yes, I do, he replied, and then mail it to them if you can find an address.*

He wrote this,

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*This is from your son, Ilya Kicha. I miss you very much and when I'm 18 I'm going to come and visit. Maybe I'll even come and live with you. I want you to know that I am ok and I am getting the best education that I need. Mom and Dad I want you to know I am getting the food and care that I need.*

*I also have a 9 year old sister. I also think she's a lot annoying but in my heart I love her very much. I also have two parents that love me very much.*

*I want you to know that it's ok to be sad because you're not with me right now. I miss you too and I am sad that I'm not with you. I don't get to hug the two parents that I love.*

*I want you to know that I am 13 years old and I have an iPod and I got it for Christmas. I have a tent in my room.*

*I want you to write back to me whenever you get time to. It doesn't even matter if you write in Russian. We can get a translator.*

*I want you to know that I have four parents, you and the two parents that are taking care of me now.*

*I also have a godmother but my godfather passed away when I was seven years old. I have an aunt and an uncle. I also have two cousins and grandparents.*

*I have a question for my two parents. Do I have grandparents and cousins and godparents?*

*I also want my whole family to write to me. I also want you to know when I come to visit I want to have a little family party.*

He didn't sign his note. He just stopped writing. He watched me read it in our living room. When I was done, I told him that it was beautiful and assured him we would do all we could to find them and deliver the letter. He thanked me and went off to play video games. He never asked about the note again.

12

## Finding His Strength

June 2007

“You dropped off a boy, you’re getting back a man!” Andrew, a fellow trial lawyer and father of sons himself smiled enthusiastically at me over lunch at a convention, his voice booming as usual. I had just finished describing to him the summer camp where only days before I had dropped off Ilya for the rest of the summer.

*I hadn’t quite thought of it that way, Andrew, but that sounds great, I do hope for that,* I replied, *thank you.* But my smile alongside his was an anxious one.

It wasn’t an ordinary summer camp, though it was in Ilya’s eyes. On the surface, it sure looked like any other summer camp. There would be hiking, camping, archery, climbing trees, zip lining, white water rafting, fishing, the list went on of all things Ilya loved or, for most of it, was excited to try for the first time.

We drove up the side of a mountain in western North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains to get there, off the paved roadway and onto a winding gravel one flanked by woods. We arrived at a clearing where we found a large wood cabin teeming with activity, a building we would soon learn was called “the lodge.” It housed the kitchen, dining hall, a recreation room and staff offices. Parents were unloading cars and ushering their teenaged children inside, while others were hugging and waving goodbye as they returned to their cars. Camp staff with clipboards were checking campers in, moms and dads scribbling signatures with one hand while lugging bags stuffed with camping gear in the other.

It was a beautiful day, warm with beams of sunlight shining through the trees, as we stepped out of the car, a setting easy to find hope in. I found myself filled with hope as I stretched from the long drive. I scanned the area beyond the lodge and saw several smaller cabins throughout the trees.

*Look, Ilya, the ropes course,* I exclaimed! I pointed to a cluster of trees among the cabins. *Look how high up the platforms are,* I said! Normally, I’d be afraid for his safety at that height, but I knew why the course was there, to help build self-confidence. I wanted that for him so badly, the safety felt secondary.

*Oh, cool, Dad,* he said. The smile on his face became even broader.

A camp counselor approached to check us off his list and direct us into the lodge. *Welcome, Ilya,* he said, shaking hands with him, *I’m one of your counselors, we’re gonna have a great time together. I’ll see you in the cabin after check-in.*

*Great, dude, I can’t wait,* Ilya said.

Ilya picked up his large backpack, heaving it onto his shoulders effortlessly. Just a couple months shy of his fourteenth birthday, he had grown to be very physically strong, lean and very muscular, well above average. He packed and re-packed it several time just to look through all his new stuff. He had new hiking boots that he never seemed to stop saying how much he loved. After spraying them with waterproof sealant, he had been wearing them everywhere for weeks to break them in.

He was finding confidence in his physical strength. I was hopeful that in the weeks ahead he would have many opportunities to realize that his physical strength could be matched with the other strengths he had that I could see, but he seemed not to understand he had. I saw in him a natural leader, who brought comfort to others, as he had among his friends in the orphanage. He had the ability to be calm in a crisis, as he had when we were in the car crash. Most often, I saw him trying to follow his peers, his actions and words showing he felt inferior to them. I saw in him empathy and a giving spirit that compelled him always to lend a helping hand to others in need. He showed that quality regularly but didn't seem yet to understand how special it made him. Ultimately, I saw in him a survivor, who had been through so much, something that could give him a real strength, if only he could see that in himself.

Having seen him rise and then fall again and again for these many years, I feared he would grow simply to believe he was only good to labor and lift heavy things. I wanted this place to help him see more in himself, to believe in himself, always. I wanted him to find a way to stop the cycle of succeeding and then losing faith in himself time and again, forcing another fall.

It was the right place, I believed, for these goals, in addition to giving him a chance to have a heck of a lot of fun and good memories to last for years to come. I believed that the people who built and ran the camp were the right ones to help him achieve what I hadn't been able to do for him. They spoke with great confidence in these youth, believing they could accomplish pretty much anything if given the chance. They opened the camp specifically for youth like Ilya. It was a camp for only developmentally, learning and emotionally disabled youth, ones who were struggling to find their way, too focused on their limitations, not their strengths.

The entire program was designed to challenge the campers to be their best for themselves and for their group. Teamwork and responsibility to self and others was built into every activity. They would do things they had never done before, individually and as a group. After a few days to get settled at the camp, they would leave behind the comfort of their cabins and hike for days on end without returning, sleeping outside, bathing outside, cooking their own food, facing physical tasks they had not confronted before. They would do it all as a group of disabled youth relying on only others like them for the first time in their lives. The counselors would take a back seat, directing all but the responsibility to ensure ultimate safety onto the campers themselves. The confidence built on the trail would be matched in their days at base camp with specific academic goals, individual to each of them. For Ilya, he would be focusing on reading and writing, with the help of a special education teacher who would come to the camp from a nearby town.

To ensure that the campers were forced to look within themselves fully, contact with home was prohibited for the first two weeks. No letters would be delivered to them and no phone calls were allowed. Parents were limited to speaking by phone with staff to check on our children and we had to agree in advance to accept that. It was an important boundary for us to, it was explained.

Too many of us would do too much for our children due to our own sensitivity to their disabilities, feeling the need to protect them from their own risk of failing even well into their teens.

As we entered the open-air porch of the lodge, filled with rows of picnic tables, I could see right away that Ilya would stand out for his physical strength. Most of the other campers who were gathered around us were nowhere near his athletic build. As I noticed that, I reassured myself that the experience would still be more than just a chance for Ilya to stand out that way among his peers. I reminded myself that the camp was specifically designed for more, that physical strength was only one part of my child that would be challenged. There would be a focus on his interpersonal skills, his leadership abilities and even building his academic skills.

My thoughts were interrupted by Ilya's backpack falling off the table where he had perched it precariously. At that moment too a counselor came over, introduced herself and sat down with a packet of papers to review with me. Ilya blushed as he picked up his pack, looking from the counselor to the other teens across the room. Nobody seemed to notice. The counselor then sent him off to introduce himself to a group of campers across the room who she had already checked in. Their parents had already left.

She spent just a few minutes with me before telling me it was time for me to go too. *Get lost, Dad,* she said with a grin, *he's ours for a while.*

*Don't worry,* she added, *he's gonna do great here. We'll make sure of it. Now go tell him goodbye.*

As I walked over to Ilya, I could see him shifting himself around on a picnic table, sitting on the table top, his foot tapping up and down off the bench as he watched the group of campers he was sitting with talking to each other. He had an expectant smile but was not part of the conversation he was watching.

When I reached him, I held my arms open for a hug. "Gotta bounce," I said, using one of his favorite expressions. He wrapped one arm around me in response and patted my back.

"Love you, be safe, have lots of fun," I said.

"See ya' dude," he said, before turning back to the group. I could tell he was trying to look nonchalant, but then he looked back towards me just before I turned to go. "Love you, Dad."

The house was quiet on my return to Florida. I missed my son but busied myself with my work and waited for the camp to call with news. They told me before I left to expect a call in about ten days.

When the call came from the camp counselor, he didn't waste a moment before telling me how well Ilya was doing.

"Mr. Dolce?"

"Yes, speaking."

“Your son’s awesome, man, you must be really, really proud,” he said to me. His voice was sincere and full of energy.

He told me they had just returned from their first long hike, how helpful Ilya was to the whole group, carrying more than his share of gear, relishing his strength. *He’s really strong*, he said.

*And he really encourages others, everyone loves him*, he told me, *Ilya helps everyone out with their responsibilities. If someone gets tired, he picks up their pack and carries it along with his so we can all keep moving. Great teamwork.*

*His cooking leaves a bit to be desired, though*, he said, laughing. *He made breakfast on the trail the first day. He tried hard, but I had to give him a different job after that.*

*But seriously, there’s room for improvement*, he said, *I’m working with him on not getting too full of himself. He sort of tries to do my job too. Not so good accepting authority. We need to work on balancing out confidence with respecting authority. We get friendly and personal here, naturally, but he needs to work on understanding the boundaries. He’s a real good kid, though, I feel really good about having him here.*

*This is all great to hear. I really appreciate your efforts with him. Thank you, so much*, I said.

*Thank you for sharing him with us. And please known, he speaks very highly of you. He clearly loves his dad, man. But listen, I got a bunch of calls to make, so unless you have any questions, just know that he’s doing great*, he concluded.

*All set, thanks again*, I said.

A week later, I got a short call from Ilya. He sounded so very happy, filling me in on the details, how far he was getting on the ropes course, how great it was to go camping, how great he was doing at archery. *I gotta get a bow and arrow when I get home, I’m great at it*, he said. And he had made lots of friends, he told me. He liked his reading teacher too, he said at the end. Everything was going well for him.

The counselors continued to check in with me weekly, reporting some ongoing problems with Ilya honoring boundaries and respecting authority, as well as a run-in or two with a friend and some resistance to doing his academic work, but continuing to praise his progress overall. They told me every time how great a kid he was and how well he was fitting in.

They repeated it all again when I returned at the end of the summer to bring my young man home. He was so confident and full of life when I arrived at the lodge to pick him up. He was the center of the conversation among his friends when I found him where I left him, on the Lodge’s open air porch.

“Hey, Dad,” he called out casually as he saw me approaching. He said it as if we had been apart six hours, not six weeks. He reached out to me for a hug, then after we embraced, spun back

around to face his friends and pick up his backpack. “Gotta bounce,” he said to them, “see ya’ next summer.”

13

## Hope Becomes Anger

November 2007

Ilya went back to school shortly after returning from camp. He told me he was going to do all his homework and classwork. He told me was determined to succeed by getting great grades. All of this he volunteered without my asking.

For weeks when I came home from work, he greeted me by saying that he had a great day at school, had done all his work, including his homework. I didn't ask to see it, knowing that he always wanted to succeed on his own and wouldn't welcome my suggestions to improve what he had done or fix any errors. In the past, if I asked too many questions or tried to verify what he told me, he would get angry and accuse me of not trusting him or trying to control him. So, I waited to hear from his teachers. When the first reports came in, they were all very positive.

While I wanted simply to be happy just for that and believe that Ilya had grown and found his way, I caught myself holding my breath anyway. I worried that another down would match this rise, but I told myself to keep the faith, that in the past months he had done exactly what he needed to do, had benefitted exactly as I had hoped from the camp. I reminded myself that most of all, Ilya was forever inherently a fun loving, resilient child with an optimistic outlook. This was the same child who sat in an orphanage beside me, living a life of deprivation, but still made his friends smile, shared the little bit of candy that he had and drew in all the love that surrounded him.

So, I dismissed my fears and told Ilya what the teachers were saying, praising him for all his efforts and his positive attitude, how pleasant he was to have in class, how happy he seemed. I told him how proud I was of him.

*See, told you I would do it,* he said to me,

*You did. Just keep on doing what you're doing,* I told him, *one day at a time, and you'll be fine. Don't worry tomorrow or next week. Remember what the Bible says, don't worry about tomorrow, for today has enough worries of its own.* It felt like I was preaching to myself as much as him.

I remained hopeful into September and early October, but still harbored a little concern that if anything went wrong, if the grades were not as good as he hoped come report card time, that he might lose confidence again. So, I kept telling him as the weeks went on how proud I was of his positive outlook and goals but reminded him that all he needed to do was to do his best.

*Even if your best is still a few C's, that really is ok, a lot of successful people were C students,* I said to him, time and again. I told him about people like Bill Gates and Steve Jobs who never even finished college, or our Uncle Al who never went at all. No matter what I said though, he always replied, *I'm going to get all A's and B's, I can do it. I did great at camp, I can do great here.*



He also seemed to become more comfortable with his peers, speaking to me more often about having friends at school. He was going to the youth group events each week at church and the director told me that he seemed happier and was fitting in better than ever. I saw the same in him in his weekly soccer practices and Saturday games. He was just more comfortable with himself than ever.

But something happened as October neared its end. He stopped greeting me when I got home with the good news of the day. Instead, he was morose, looked angry most of the time and kept to himself more than he ever had. He denied anything was wrong the several times that I asked. I never did figure out what caused the change, whether it was just one or two specific things, or if he just couldn't sustain the energy to keep doing all that he had been doing to succeed. I wondered if he just got too tired from trying. No matter the reason, it was clear to me that his happy disposition and optimism were gone, faded to zero over about a week.

The concerned notes and calls from school soon followed, especially from his reading teacher who seemed to care about him the most. She let me know the day before his big writing assignment was due that he had not even started it and claimed to her that he lost it. His failure to do his work was matched by disrespectful behavior towards her and his habit of interrupting class to get attention from his peers had returned. Even when she spoke to him privately, she told me, he was even more defiant than ever. She gave him an extension on the assignment, allowing him Thanksgiving break to catch up.

I was devastated to see how far he had fallen so quickly. Not knowing why, I decided it was best not to mention camp or ask any more what had gone wrong. Instead, I decided that the best way to approach Ilya was to acknowledge how angry he was, to try to get him to express what was going on or help him figure out what happened.

So, I made us dinner Friday evening after work, inviting him to decide what I should make. We sat down to eat and I let him know that I could feel his anger, assuring him that I believed he had every right to be angry if that's how he felt. *Lots of things have happened to you that you should be angry about*, I said. I told him that I had been angry about a bunch of stuff too a few years earlier and my therapist had me write it all down. It felt good to get it all out, and it was easier to write it down than say it out loud, I told him, so maybe we could do the same thing for him.

*And you can keep it to yourself if you want, I don't have to read it*, I assured him, *it's up to you if you want to share it*. I kept talking about it, mainly my own experience with it, but not asking for an answer from him.

He didn't say much until finally, without even looking up at me, he said, *Ok, I'll try it*. Then he put his fork down. *What's for dessert*, he asked?

The next morning, I gave him a stack of construction paper and crayons, like I had used in the hospital. He sat down at his desk in his bedroom.

*Can I get a real pen*, he asked me?

*You can, but crayons worked better for me, so maybe give it a try. You can switch to a pen if it doesn't feel right,* I said.

*Ok, whatever,* he replied. He picked up a crayon and glanced over his shoulder at me. *You can go now.*

I went downstairs to the family room and waited, flipping through TV channels unable to focus on any one show. About half an hour went by and he appeared in front of me.

*Here,* he said, handing me a stack of papers. I could see that he wrote a lot and he looked angry. *You can read it.*

*Are you sure,* I asked?

*Yes,* he said.

*Do you want to sit with me when I do,* I asked?

*No,* he replied, tersely.

*Ok,* I said. I stood up and handed him the TV remote. He took my place on the family room sofa and I went to the living room to read.

I read that he was angry at almost everyone. Me, for not trusting him and trying to control him, telling him what to do all the time, caring only about his grades and not caring about him. His adoptive mother for much the same reasons and for criticizing him and for loving Sarah more than him. His classmates and soccer teammates for making fun of him, not respecting him, for making him feel "left out." His teachers for giving him too much work. He was also angry with Alex, his godfather, for dying. He was angry with my father for not spending enough time visiting him. His sister for how easy school was for her, while he had to struggle, calling her "little miss perfect." He was angry with the caregivers at the orphanage for not doing more for him. His birth mother for not keeping him and raising him. His list went on for pages. I flipped back and forth through them trying to think of any person or group of people in his life that he was not angry with. Only his friends at the orphanage and church were spared.

I went back to him. *Thank you for sharing this with me. I understand why you are angry,* I said. *Do you want to talk about what you wrote,* I asked?

*No,* he said, with no apparent emotion. He didn't look up from the TV.

He had just told me how angry he was with me for trying to control him. If I tried to coax him into talking about what he wrote, to try to resolve at least some of it, I wondered, would he simply feel that I was trying now to control his feelings? He would, I believed. So, I walked away and left him alone with his anger.

I shouldn't have walked away.

14

## Bootcamp Winter - Spring 2008

The phone ringing at my bedside woke me up. It was still dark out. A glance at the clock and I saw it was just five a.m. I answered the phone. A booming, clearly angry voice all but yelled at me. It made me sit up in bed.

*Mr. Dolce, you need to make plans to come to the Academy this morning. We have to have a meeting about your son.* It was Ilya's sergeant, a deputy Sheriff at Eagle Academy, in Belle Glade, Florida, about an hour from our home.

*What happened? Is he OK,* I asked?

*Your son spit on another cadet while in formation this morning! With the law within arm's reach, he spit on another human being! I was standing right next to him and he spit on another human being! I have never seen anything like it!*

I had never known Ilya to spit on anyone, or anything for that matter, not even the ground.

*You need to be here by eight when the counselors arrive,* he added before hanging up.

I left a voice message at my office not to expect me and to clear my calendar for the day and I got ready to leave. I thought momentarily that I should try to call his psychiatrist, Dr. K. After Ilya had written down all that he was angry about but continued to show no intention of even trying to do his schoolwork, I turned to Dr. K for advice. He cared very much for Ilya, had been his doctor for several years after a half dozen other psychiatrists treated him but never really seemed to be invested in his success or even getting to know him. They would spend less than five minutes with him at an appointment before slightly altering a script or taking no action at all.

In a welcomed contrast, at each appointment Dr. K spent almost a full hour speaking with Ilya before calling me in to join them for a few minutes to tell me what they wanted me to know. Often, Dr. K helped Ilya tell me something about his feelings he had been keeping to himself and worried about telling me, like a conflict with his mother or a complaint about me or someone bothering him at school. Each time, Dr. K told him I might be able to help him deal with it rather than Ilya carrying that burden alone.

Before Thanksgiving, I spoke with Dr. K about how the success following summer camp had crashed in a couple of months. He suggested that I consider some type of military-style boarding school for Ilya. He explained that he felt that he might benefit from the structure and discipline imposed on him at a school like that, as well as the clear measures of daily success that came with the environment. He reminded me that Ilya grew up in an institution for most of his formative years.

*You can't give him that structure in a regular home, he told me. He just might need a lot of structure to succeed, personally and academically. You're trying very hard, but you should consider if you can really give him what he needs.*

He then told me about Eagle Academy, which was run by the county Sheriff for at risk youth. They would not accept youth with drug or alcohol problems or a juvenile justice record. The goal was to intercede with youth whose lives were failing before they got into real trouble. It wasn't that far from our home, Dr. K said, and the Academy worked closely with the families to create stronger relationships with the cadets before they returned home. He said he would write a recommendation letter, told me who to call and asked that I consider it seriously. *It could be just what he needs*, he said.

I had a lot of faith in Dr. K's judgement, so I called right away. I liked all that I heard, though the more I thought about my son not being under my care daily, to protect him and guide him, the bigger the pit of worry in my stomach felt. Not having any better ideas though and seeing how Dr. K's view mirrored much of what Dr. Federici had told me a decade earlier, I began to feel that we had to try it.

So, I talked to Ilya about it and showed him the Academy's web site. He was interested immediately, loved the uniforms he saw the cadets wearing and the physical activities they were engaging in, like an obstacle course. And he thought the barracks looked cool. They were open style, with rows of cots, a footlocker aside each one. He said that he wanted to go.

*Won't you miss your old man, though*, I asked him?

*Uh, probably not*, he replied with a grin.

I grinned back. *Well, I will certainly miss you, but I get to come see you on weekends. I'll get the application process going. You'll have to write an essay and be interviewed, but I will help you with all that. Let's try to get you in.*

It took about a month to complete the process and it proved to be very uncertain. Ilya's admissions counselor strongly supported his application after meeting him, but he told me that the decision was not solely his, a team of people had to agree. Not all those involved in evaluating his application were sure that it was the right place for him. Despite Dr. K's recommendation, they worried that Ilya's problems might be less the types of behavioral problems and weak family supports that they were used to working to correct, but more organic, psychiatric problems that their program could not address.

*He meets all the criteria for our program*, the counselor insisted to me on the phone midway through the process, *and I really like the kid and I am confident you will be a good parent partner with us. You're both really motivated, so I'm not giving up.* He explained that even if Ilya had additional problems, he felt that he did have the behavioral and coping problems the program could address.

He called me when he prevailed, absolutely thrilled. Ilya was ecstatic. And I was relieved to have hope back.

I took Ilya to the Academy in January for his first day. Dozens of us parents were seated with our kids in a large cafeteria-style dining room, rows of tables with attached benches. We all had bags filled with the required uniforms and gear we were told to buy and bring with us for our kids. I looked around and saw that most parents looked a bit anxious, like I was.

We were all eager for the staff to arrive and get the day underway, but I wasn't ready for what I experienced next. As the clock struck the hour, without any warning, about two dozen sheriff's deputies marched into the room, their combat boots sounding loudly across the tile floor, echoing off the walls. They wore camouflage fatigues and sharp brimmed Sheriff hats. They swarmed through the rows and benches and they were yelling. At my child and all the other children. They ordered them to line up along the wall.

*Stand at attention, cadets!*

*Move faster!*

*Straighten up that line. I said, straighten it up!*

*Faster! We don't have all day, cadets!*

*Face forward, cadet, don't slouch, pull your shoulders back!*

Double doors to the outside flung open.

*March, march, march! Move it cadets! Stay in line! Faster! March, march, march!* And out the door our children went with the deputies.

I started to cry. Images of the man who raped me as a child, in his military uniform, flashed through my mind and pain gripped my chest. His voice screaming at me with delight as he raped me. *Oh God, what have I done to my son*, I thought? In my next thought I tried to reassure myself, *this is different. Ilya is safe. These police are not that man. Ilya is safe. They won't hurt him. He's not in that basement. You are not in that basement. Stay here in the present*, I told myself.

I regained my composure enough to get through the rest of the process, turning in Ilya's gear, meeting everyone I was supposed to meet, getting all the papers I was supposed to get. Then I wept half the way home.

It had been a difficult several weeks since then. My flashbacks subsided and I felt Ilya was safe, but I missed him desperately. Our home was so quiet. When Sarah wasn't there, it was just me talking to myself, the TV always on to break the silence, and the occasional meow from our cat. Despite having the expectation of seeing Ilya every weekend, I had only seen him once, on the first weekend. After that, visitation had to be earned and Ilya was among the few who were not earning visitation or a short trip home. He was falling short of his weekly goals, not accumulating

enough points to earn visitation privileges. The cadets wore identical grey camouflage fatigues but had colored baseball caps. Each level of progress required those accumulated points to earn the next colored cap. Ilya was lagging one color behind most of his peers.

In the meantime, I went to a nearby high school for weekly meetings of Eagle Academy parents. Various Academy officials and our children's counselors would attend to provide updates and answer questions, but the main part of the meetings was conducted by a child and family psychologist. She taught us all about parenting, defining our parentings styles to see the strengths and weaknesses in our basic approach. Were we too authoritarian, driving wedges between ourselves and our children, and damaging their self-esteem? Were we too permissive, leaving them in their immaturity too much to their own devices? Were we not involved enough in their lives? Was our approach to discipline or consequences for bad behaviors effective? These were the questions we were required to confront as we worked through how to become more effective parents, in better control of our relationships with our children and better able to motivate and guide them in their daily lives.

I felt that I was learning a lot at each session. It was making me think about how I reacted to Ilya's defiance and rejection of authority, whether mine or his teachers. Mainly, I felt now that I had spent too much time talking to him about it when things went wrong. Even when I held back for days or a week when he was heading in the wrong direction, when I let my frustration burst out I would "monologue," talking to him about it over the entire course of an evening, making it the sole topic of conversation, lecturing about his future and what he had to do now to get there later. It was too intense for him and too much about the future, I came to appreciate, provoking him to be even more defiant or to reject my instructions as not relevant in the present. I hadn't been staying true to what Dr. Federici said, that "talk therapy" didn't work with kids like Ilya, that I had to let him experience the natural consequences of his choices and wait patiently for him to learn from that.

My best intentions mattered not. He wasn't going to accept my efforts to control his academic life. While I could not completely ignore his school performance, it was best for him that I leave his success mainly to his many teachers, and any consequences that came his way for not doing his best. I had to parent him differently, as Dr. Federici told me a decade earlier.

Ilya needed something from me a lot more than discipline and direction in his academic life, I came to appreciate better in the class. He needed me to help him find his way through what troubled him the most, where he felt alone and there were no other guides. It was his belief that he didn't really belong in his life as it was, that he needed his birth family, that he needed to reclaim his birth nation by recapturing his command over its language and wrapping himself in its flag and its name.

I also realized in the classes how my past was in the way of being the parent Ilya needed. I had dealt with my abusive past by hiding it from others for decades, projecting wellbeing and strength in my academic and professional success, claiming victory even now by championing children in the legislature. Ilya needed me to be pleased with him for something other than his homework and grades, where I found my safety and strength. He did not feel he could measure up to others academically, that his disabilities made it too hard to do so, and I told him that. I told him that his best might just be C's even when he was striving for more. No matter what I intended, to him, this could be setting him apart not just from his peer group, but also from me. It wasn't the affirmation I wanted it to be. And more, I was still haunted by the past and Ilya certainly could see that. I had all but told him that.

It seemed that I should talk to him less about his schoolwork and more about the rest of his life. Why was I his dad? I was his dad to teach him lessons about life, not lessons in a classroom. I was his dad to help him find refuge, to find home, to be there for him even when he fell down. I might believe that I was those things to him, but he was not convinced, at least not yet. He was telling me that when he told me what he was angry about, but I had been missing it. I walked away when he needed me to stay. My challenge when he came home from the Academy would be meeting him where he truly needed me to meet him, where he was troubled now.

At the Academy, Ilya was still defying authority constantly, his main counselor told me in our weekly calls. The deputies found Ilya to be very stubborn, he told me, much more so than they usually saw. He seemed not to care about the consequences most of the time, taking much longer to accept the process than it usually took with new cadets, he said. The deputies were very frustrated with him, but they weren't giving up on Ilya, he assured me, time and again.

Their frustration was now very clear to me as the deputy yelled through the phone that my son had spit on another cadet. I had no idea what would happen as I drove to the Academy that morning. I felt a bit guilty with the first thought I had when I arrived and saw Ilya in the hall waiting outside his counselor's office. Not having seen him in so long, I thought, I'm kind of glad he spit on someone, thank God I get to see him.

While I never did quite understand why, the moment proved to be a turning point for Ilya at the Academy. He continued to remain one hat color behind most of the cadets, but he started earning and accumulating points faster and not losing them to bad choices. He stopped defying the deputies and earned regular visitation rights. We got to see each other most Sundays. His academic progress improved too as he accepted the program and his counselor's reports became more and more positive. Eventually, he told me that Ilya was on track to earn enough points to graduate the program successfully at the end of the semester, not just get a certificate of attendance.

Ilya would earn an Academy ring to wear, an ever-present symbol of his strength and success. I was so proud and so relieved to be able to present him that ring at his graduation. I'm not sure he was ever prouder of himself than he was when he put that ring on his finger.



15

## Rise and Shine

June 2008

After Ilya came home from the Academy, I piled him and Princess Sarah into the back seat of the car early one morning, filled the trunk with our luggage, and headed out to vacation destinations that I alone knew.

*Where are we going, Dad? You gotta tell us.* Ilya kept asking the same question the night before we left and kept asking in the morning as we readied ourselves to leave. *Disney World? Are we going to Disney World,* they both tried? It mattered not how many times I calmly replied, *you'll find out when we get there.* I only told them there would be no airplanes involved.

Princess Sarah and The Boy. These were my children. I anointed Sarah at birth, "Her Imperial Majesty Princess Sarah Hope." "Princess Sarah," for short. I don't remember where "The Boy" came from as Ilya's nick name, I just know it was with him from his earliest days with me. I periodically tried to bestow a royal title on him too. *Duke,* I offered, *Duke of Donuts? We love donuts.* But no matter what I tried, he made it clear he was happy with just, "The Boy."

Having them settled into the back seat now, before I turned the engine on, I reached round and handed them a roadmap of the state to share, with a yellow highlighter. *We're going on a road trip,* I explained, *and I will only tell you that we are staying inside Florida and going to several places.*

*You each get a prize if you work together, read the road signs and figure out where we are going. When we arrive, you have to tell me where we are and show me on the map how we got there,* I told them.

*What's the prize,* they asked?

*Cash money,* I replied, *to buy whatever you want on the trip.*

Having them work together was no accident. It was very much my intention to create opportunities to have Ilya and Sarah bond together, to reinforce a sense of family. By the end of the trip, they had risen to the challenge, finding each destination and showing me the map accurately highlighted with our route.

*But wait, there's more,* I explained, as they unfolded the map to find their starting point. I handed a packet of paper back to them. On the pages was a chart, entitled, "Road Trip Treasure Hunt." *You have to find as many things on this chart together as you can,* I told them. *You have the whole trip to find them. More cash money is the prize. The more items you find, the more money you get when we return,* I said to them, *and you work as a team.*

On the list were things they could see while we were driving and things they could see in the hotels we stayed in, the restaurants and stores we visited, the sites we were to see. As I started the engine, they started to read them out loud, guessing what they felt they could find easily, like a brochure with a tiger on it, an Alabama license plate, and a pinecone. They were less certain of finding a three wheeled motorcycle, green sneakers, and plastic fruit. Twins they were certain they would find. The smashed frog, probably not, they figured, though time was to prove them wrong.

As we headed out from our home, I was excited for us to experience the state with Ilya and Sarah. I had gotten to know it quite well while working in the state Senate for four years, visiting most parts of it, including every major city. There was so much to see and do. Just a couple hours' drive each day could take us to a new experience, so the drive would not do much to wear us down.

We stayed a day or two at each place before heading out to somewhere very different next. On the east coast, we saw rockets and a space shuttle at Cape Canaveral, toured the historic fort, Castillo de San Marcos, and went to the *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* museum in St. Augustine. We learned to ice skate in a rink in Sarasota on the west coast. And we raced go karts in Jacksonville after swimming in a rooftop pool. We went canoeing in the Ocala National Forest in central Florida, where the children saw their first bald eagle and where we all laughed so hard when Ilya was too absorbed reading a brochure to see a racoon walk up to him and sit at his feet hoping for a handout of food. It reminded me that the first time Sarah laughed out loud as a baby was when Ilya was clowning around for her.

The night before canoeing provided yet another opportunity for the children to work together when I spontaneously decided at dinner to speak only French to them until the next morning, getting the idea when I overheard people speaking French at the next table in the restaurant. Neither of them knew any French, but I knew quite a bit from five years of studying the language in high school and college. They helped each other figure out what I was saying from the context and hearing certain words several times, laughing together the whole time.

The treasure hunt kept us all engaged the entire trip. We found the three-wheeled motorcycle on the highway with only about half an hour left before returning home. Meanwhile, we saw twins many times over, seeing a set almost every day, including in an Orlando restaurant where three sets were seated at tables next to ours at the same time. The most elusive prize on the treasure hunt list, it turned out, was item forty-three, a baby wearing sunglasses. We were all surprised. We live in Florida. Surely in the middle of the summer we would run across several, we mused each day of our travels. But we never saw one on our road trip that year. But for years after that, we continued to exclaim to each other when we did anywhere else.

Sharing life like this together gave me a sense of whole as a family that I often lacked in my own childhood. All the while I hoped that I was providing Ilya what he needed to feel that he belonged, that he was as much a part of his family as anyone else, despite our lack of any blood tie. To me, he was that and more. And he inspired and supported me when it most mattered, as true family would.

16

## Holding On, Letting Go Fall 2008

Ilya could have returned to Eagle Academy in the fall of 2008. His counselor recommended it, feeling that it would help better ensure that the lessons he learned late in the spring became part of him, the permanent him. He reminded me and Ilya that he was one of the last cadets to stop resisting the program and accept its principles. *I want him to have more time to experience how the beliefs and attitudes and habits we build here are important to success*, he said.

Ilya would have nothing to do with the idea. He said he was satisfied that he graduated and got his ring. He said to me several times that he had learned the Academy's lessons and was ready to be a great student back in regular school. He was stronger than ever, he told me.

In the face of his confidence, I still felt that he should go back, that it would ultimately build his self-esteem and sense of belonging, without the risk that he would fail again if he returned to his regular school. It was true that he had not had much time to live the program's principles after showing that he accepted them. But I also believed that if I pushed too hard for it, Ilya was less likely to change his mind and return. And he could only go anyway if he stated that he wanted to be there. The Academy would only admit cadets who said so.

When it became clear that nothing was going to change Ilya's mind, I reassured myself with the fact that he had spent a total of some seven months of the last year between camp and the Academy. He had learned and grown from both. Surely, he had internalized the most important lessons, I thought. He had proven his strengths to himself as much as anyone else.

Several weeks into the school year, I became convinced that it had all worked, that Ilya was right, he had grown and was ready to be a great student and control his own future. His teachers each told me that he started the year motivated and working hard. But by mid-semester in October, I started receiving frustrated messages from teachers who could not figure out where things had gone wrong. He was now failing all his tests after missing or performing poorly in his classwork and homework assignments. Ilya was still passing his classes because his grades the first quarter were so strong, they were balancing out the second. But I was warned what was obvious, that his strong first quarter couldn't carry the whole year. He was going to be failing the grade altogether if he didn't start working again.

Ilya's teachers told me that the entire focus of his time and energy were now focused on trying to make friends. He was constantly misbehaving to draw attention to himself, goofing off to try to get his classmates to laugh. No amount of counseling by his teachers had any impact on his behavior. He did not seem to care what any of them said to him. What was worse, his antics were having the opposite effect of what he sought. He wasn't making friends. He was coming across as far less mature than his peers and his constant interruptions in class were just frustrating his classmates who wanted to succeed.

I talked to Ilya about his failing grades, but mindful of the lessons from parenting classes at Eagle Academy, I tried to only look forward with him. I tried to show him a path to a fresh start. His exams were every nine weeks. I told him to let the current nine-week period expire and then start a new plan to structure his study time at home the way it was done at the Academy, with fixed times to start and complete assignments and study. The time afterwards would be his personal time to do what he wished.

He was receptive and said he would let me help him keep the structure each evening, though he still did not want me to review his work. He wanted to do it himself and not have me correct anything or make suggestions for improvement.

*That's fine with me, I told him, I already went to high school and really don't want to go again anyway.*

The humor seemed to help keep him receptive to letting me help him just get things done, which is what most mattered.

It worked for a while, but as days turned into weeks and the holidays were upon us, he started claiming that he did his homework at school and brought nothing home. On more than one occasion, I found the homework sheets in the trash can, blank.

After a short reprieve, the complaints from his teachers resumed. Ilya was at best the "class clown" who was only interested in trying to make everyone like him by laughing at his antics. I became convinced he would not be successful as long as he was focused so heavily on trying to get attention from his peers, to feel that he belonged and fit in. And I had no idea what to do about it.

After the New Year, we had a glimmer of hope as he briefly stepped up his efforts, but by the end of the third quarter he was completing less than half of all class and homework assignments. I met with his teachers and we concluded that he might simply be overwhelmed by the volume of the class material. We felt that he could not keep up with the pace of his classes, despite his individual education plan providing for additional time as needed to complete work and take exams. We speculated that he might just be anticipating failure, so he would give up before really trying.

With that concern, for the final quarter, he was reassigned in his non-special education, mainstream classes to simpler ones. We hoped that would relieve the pressure and he would catch up. It didn't work.

17

## Protect Our Kids First May 2009

The spring of 2009 marked five years since I had disclosed to the world and to my son that I had been sexually abused as a child. Each of those years, during Florida's annual legislative session, Ilya wished me good luck when I told him that I was off again to Tallahassee to change the law to make children safer. As he got older, he asked me more questions about what happened to me and to the man who hurt me. I kept to myself the details of what was done to me, confident that the ongoing news coverage someone at school might ask him about said no more than I had already told him.

But I did tell him that the perpetrator was still free, like many others who could still hurt children. I told him about the registered sex offenders who lived in the neighborhoods near us. I showed him on the Department of Corrections web site, pointing out on the map where we lived and how close some of them were. I told him that there could be more who were just never arrested, the ones we did not know about. *That's most of them*, I told him, *most of them don't get caught*.

Ilya looked worried but told me that he would be careful to stay away from them. He asked me though, *Why do they do this, why do they want to hurt kids?*

I didn't have an answer for him. *I don't really know, Ilya, all we can do is protect ourselves from them.*

*But it's just wrong. There's no excuse*, he insisted, *the cops just need to put them all in jail.*

*That's why we're doing this*, I told him.

With Ilya's unanswerable question on my mind, I made the four hundred mile drive to the capital multiple times each spring, meeting legislators in their offices, hallways or elevators to seek their support for the bill. I testified many times before legislative committees in the Senate and House that were considering the bill, passing it time and again but never advancing it to the floor of either chamber for a final vote, the limits of my political influence in the face of the organized opposition that I faced.

As the bill died in committee for the fifth year in a row, I sat down in our living room with Ilya and Sarah, who were now fifteen and eleven years old. I told them that I was tired of losing the battle each year and that I wanted to try to win a different way. As much as I did not expect them to understand it fully, I told them that I wanted to form a political campaign to go around the legislature and instead amend the state constitution with a voter referendum on election day. They had both been to the ballot box with me in prior election years, so they had some understanding of the concept.

But it was not easy to get any issue on the ballot for everyone to vote on, I explained. I told them that we would have to collect nearly seven hundred thousand signatures of registered voters across the state. The number left them wide-eyed. Then I told them I would need to raise at least a million dollars to accomplish that. They were even more incredulous at that news.

*Wow, Dad, that's a lot, do you have a million dollars,* Ilya asked?

*Uh, no, we have to get donations,* I replied, *I will have to talk to a lot of people, get a lot of people involved.*

Ilya immediately said that he would help.

*Well, I said, before you agree, I need you both to understand what this means. I haven't decided yet to do this for sure. That's why we're having this meeting.*

Sarah interrupted to ask if we could buy some stuff that we wanted with the million dollars. She giggled. *No, Princess, sorry, we can only use it for the campaign.*

I explained to them that I would probably have to be gone from home more to win the fight. I would have to travel across the state, not just to Tallahassee. I would have to travel all year round, not just the few months surrounding the legislative session. And I might be busier at night, I told them, needing to do my regular job during the day and work on the campaign evenings and weekends.

*It's going to be hard, we have a lot of petitions to get signed, we'll need lots of signatures, not just money to raise. People are still going to try to stop us. It's going to be a lot of work. So, it's ok to say no, but I want to know how you feel. Should we do this,* I asked them?

Sarah spoke up first, more serious this time. *If it's good for kids, why wouldn't you do it,* she asked? I smiled her. I was so proud of her. But I didn't say anything in response. I didn't want to influence Ilya's response.

I turned to him. *What do you think,* I asked?

*Well, I'll get signatures at school,* he said, *let's do it.*

*Great,* I said, *I am glad we're all in this together. I want to win, and I know that we can.*

Ilya jumped to his feet. *I'll be right back,* he said, running up the stairs.

He ran back down the stairs a moment later, a CD in his hand. *Here,* he said, handing me the CD, *you can play it in your car.*

I looked at it. Will Smith was looking back at me from the cover. *Willennium,* I asked Ilya?

*They can't stop you, dad,* he said, *it can be our theme song.* He was beaming.

It took me a moment, but when I realized what he meant, I exclaimed, *perfect!* It was there in the lyrics of the first song on the album. “I’m comin’, you can’t stop me ... I’m comin’, you can’t hold me back.”

From that day forward, every time I drove off on our mission, I played that song. And every time I arrived in Tallahassee, I made sure that it was the last song I listened to before walking into the capitol building.

Inspired by my children and supported by them, I formed the campaign and called it, “Protect Our Kids First.” The name itself was an answer to the opponents’ criticism of repealing the statutes of limitation. No matter what they argued, whether it was the fairness of facing “old evidence” or insurance premiums going up, or any other excuses they came up with, they were not protecting our kids first. The only way to protect kids first was to wipe out the statutes of limitations.

We printed up hundreds of petitions and started to gather signatures. Each one had to be filled out and signed by a registered voter, one page each. The first batches were collected by my children at their schools. Both brought handfulls home in their backpacks. Ilya also took them to his soccer league, getting all the coaches and the parents in the stands to sign, explaining one at a time how important it was.

I announced the campaign to the press in June 2010. *The Palm Beach Post* carried the story first, issuing its article on July 4th. I asked the reporter to put one thing in the story for me, that I challenged the Legislature to change the law before the voters of Florida did, to beat us to the ballot box. Two days after the story ran, State Representative Chris Dorworth from central Florida called me. “I want to beat you to the ballot box,” he said. He wanted to sponsor the legislation. He was in line to be Speaker of the House, making him one of the most influential legislators in the state. He was the most powerful elected official ever to take an active role in the effort.

I rushed home that night and told Ilya, as best I could explain to him, what was happening.

*I think our campaign is working already, I told him, I think we’re going to win!*

*Of course, they can’t stop us, dad, he said.*



18

Never Enough  
August 2009

If Ilya got his hands on matches, or found a lighter on the ground, he would find something to set on fire in our home, usually in the bathroom, and too often coming close to burning himself. It was more than a boy's curiosity. I had been a boy once. Matches were fascinating. Fun to experiment with. But I could see in him a fixation on fire, deeply, aware of the danger but impervious to it as he allowed it to get out of control and watch its destruction. Willing to burn even things he liked to be near the flames. And that never went away for long.

I was at my desk in my law office when the phone rang late one morning. A serious voice asked, *Is this Mr. Dolce?*

*Yes.*

*You are Ilya Dolce's father?*

*Yes, ma'am.*

*This is the assistant principal at Palm Beach Central High School, she said. We need you to come to the school right away. The police are here with your son.*

My hand started to tremble, almost causing me to drop the phone. *Is he ok?* My mind started to race with all the possibilities.

*Well, she said, he's in some trouble. The police will explain everything when you get here.*

Ilya had been caught by a security guard in the restroom, trying to set it on fire. He was seated in the main office when I arrived, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, head down. He barely glanced up at me.

The deputy sheriff was visibly angry as he barked out what Ilya had done. *He's lucky not much in there was flammable, he said, I could charge him with arson. It's a felony,* he added.

The seriousness of the moment was not lost on me. A felony like that, committed in a school with so many children potentially in harm's way, could get him locked up in the juvenile justice system until he was eighteen. He was just fifteen now.

*Can we speak privately,* I asked?

He agreed to step down the hall, out of Ilya's earshot. I explained to him Ilya's disabilities, that he had cerebral palsy, and other developmental disorders. That he was fifteen but was more like an eleven-year-old in his development. I told him of all the mental health care I was getting him.

*I've been trying to impress on him the dangers of fire, I'll work with his therapist and his psychiatrist, I said. I adopted him from an orphanage when he was four, I shared. He doesn't always accept authority, but he'll listen to me. We're tight, I can get a handle on this, I said, though inside I knew I was overselling. Nothing like this will ever happen again, I promised the deputy.*

I saw his stern expression start to soften as he learned more about who Ilya was. He told me he would release Ilya to me, but there would be a full report filed with the Sheriff, so any police he encountered again would know of the offense.

*I'm satisfied, he told me, that you are getting him the interventions he needs. I believe you will follow up on this. We don't get that with all parents, he said. I thanked him.*

He walked back to Ilya. *Stand up, son.* His sternness was back. Ilya stood up, almost at attention. He looked scared. *I didn't know your name before today. But I know it now. I better not hear it again or you will be arrested. You get one second chance with me and this is it.*

Ilya remained standing stiff upright as the deputy left. The assistant principal, who had been standing by the whole time, approached me in the next moment, handed me Ilya's suspension papers and we left, in silence.

Despite the deputy not knowing his name, it was not the first time that year that Ilya had done something that could get him arrested. As he grew, there was nothing he seemed to value more than things he could use to build things. Nuts and bolts found on the ground were cherished and saved in his room. But his past seemed to taint his passion.

One day we were in a hardware store together. I needed just the right sized screws to install some new lights in our kitchen. We stood in an aisle in front of open barrels of all kinds of fasteners. I was looking above the barrels at packets of screws hanging above them. I thought I saw the right size that I needed, so I began to reach up, my back now to Ilya, but at as my fingers reached I read "concrete screws" and realized that I wasn't in the wood screws section, so I pulled back suddenly and looked down the aisle in Ilya's direction, just in time to see his hand fly out of his pocket.

The lumpy bulge in his right pocket betrayed what he had been doing. *What are you doing, I demanded, as if I hadn't already figured it out? His eyes cast to the floor. He was silent and motionless. Put them back immediately, I commanded. He emptied both pockets back into the barrels. I hadn't noticed the bulge on the left.*

*I would have bought you those if you had just asked, I told him. I make enough money, we're not lacking for anything, I stressed, abandoning my own quest for screws to finish our lighting project.*

While heading for the door, I held my breath. In my law practice, I had represented the company that owned the store just a few years earlier. I knew of their zero-tolerance policy for shoplifting. Even juveniles with parents were detained as the police were called in every single case. If the store security team had seen him on the overhead cameras, we wouldn't make it to the door. In

the face of my anxiety, I tried not to walk quickly, fearful it would draw unwanted attention. As we finally cleared the door, I resisted the urge to look back to see if we were being followed.

*Get in the car*, I told Ilya. Safely inside, I indulged myself, looking over my shoulder to check our path from the door. Nobody followed us. *Thank God*, I thought.

As I drove us down the street to another hardware store, *Thou shalt not steal, Ilya*, I said, *It's pretty simple. Not a whole lot to think about, just tell me what you want to buy*, I added. I would learn later that Ilya had already shoplifted from the second store. When we got home, I looked through his bedroom for anything else he might have taken when he was out and about on his own after school. I found more hardware with the second store's price stickers still on them.

But I knew it wasn't about thinking and it wasn't about all that we might have. It wasn't the morality of stealing, not for Ilya at least. He was always going to secret away things that he valued and would be hard to convince there was enough, especially food, Dr. Federici had warned me when Ilya was five. He said that Ilya would most likely hoard food in his bedroom, no matter how much was in reach in the kitchen. He explained that because he spent his early years deprived of what he needed in an orphanage and had no parent to turn to help or comfort him, he will do this. And he cautioned that Ilya might shoplift when he got older, again, no matter how much he had.

As he explained these things, I thought about the first time that I first really appreciated what Ilya's deprivation in the orphanage had meant to him. It was his first Christmas morning with me. He had been with us just three weeks. We led him to the living room, sat him in front of the tree, handing him his classic red and white stocking. His stocking was filled it with chocolates and small toys and three Florida oranges, a tribute to his new home state. He dumped the lot out of the floor in front him.

Immediately, he shoved the chocolates and toys aside, scooped up the oranges in his little arms, filling them. He leapt to his feet, a huge smile across his face, and started exclaiming with joy, jumping up and down while cradling the oranges. Again and again, he exclaimed, *apelsiny, apelsiny, apelsiny!* I scrambled for my Russian-English dictionary, flipping through the pages to find the answer. It was simple. Oranges, oranges, oranges!

I wasn't surprised to hear Dr. Federici warn about hoarding food. Months after learning that oranges and any manner of other fresh fruit were in our refrigerator, Ilya persisted in sneaking food into his bedroom. He started doing it shortly after his arrival. Years later, I still believed he would grow out of it. I told him several times as he grew older that he could just get whatever he wanted from the kitchen, whenever he wanted it, without asking. *I don't want bugs*, I explained to him. I thought that giving him unfettered, judgment-free access to the pantry would do the trick. But it didn't.

A kitten, though, proved to be the key to changing everything. We had just gotten into the car in the morning. I would be dropping him off at school before going on to my office. When I started the engine, we immediately heard a kitten meowing.

*I think there's a cat under the car*, I said. We both got out to look. We saw a tiny kitten crouched beside a tire, meowing.

*Can you reach it*, I asked, peering across the pavement at Ilya?

As he moved his hand slowly towards the kitten it jumped up into the engine compartment, meowing the entire time.

I told Ilya to stay on the ground. *I'll pop the hood and try to get it to jump back down*, I said. That didn't work. I couldn't even see the kitten.

*Stay here*, I instructed Ilya, *I'll go get some of April's food. We can coax it out with that*, I said. April was our cat. I ran back into the house and returned with a saucer of cat food. I laid back down on the ground and slid it under the car. The meowing persisted.

*I'm gonna be late for school*, Ilya said.

*Well, I can't drive with the kitten in the engine, it could be killed*, I said. *Don't worry, I'll explain it to your school*, I added. I got up to pop the hood again, hoping I could see the kitten this time.

As I peered through the engine, Ilya suddenly said, *Dad, I have a problem, look at my arm*.

I ran around to his side of the car. He sat up and was holding left arm straight out, trying to brush it off. *I think something bit me*, he said, *there's a bunch of red ants over here*.

*Oh God*, I said to him, seeing his hand swollen and red. The redness and swelling were visibly running up his arm rapidly. I looked at the ground where he had been lying down. There were hundreds of fire ants swarming around the pavement.

*We have to go. Now*, I exclaimed!

We lived only a mile and a half from a hospital.

*But the kitten*, he protested.

*I don't care, get in the car*, I yelled back, *you could be going into anaphylaxis. We're going to the emergency room*. With that, he jumped back in the car.

We heard the kitten meowing the entire way to the hospital. It was still going when I parked the car.

I ran Ilya into the emergency room, straight to the triage desk and told them he had multiple fire ant bites. She took one look at his arm, now red and swollen to the shoulder. *Come with me, sweetie*, she said to him, *you need a doctor right away*.

They disappeared through a door while another nurse stopped me to get his medical information. As much as I wanted to go with him, I knew they needed to know about the multiple prescriptions he was on. I ran through the list with her as she typed into a computer, then reviewed all his medical conditions. *No known allergies*, I told her.

When we were done with all the questions and copying the insurance card and my license, I was finally allowed back. I was relieved to see him lying comfortably in a bed, but for his still swollen arm and a couple needles in his other arm. A nurse was doting over him. He seemed to be enjoying the attention.

*Definitely an allergic reaction*, she told me. *The doctor's treating the anaphylaxis*, she said, *we'll need to keep him for a few hours to monitor his recovery. You should have him back by lunchtime.*

I thought of the implications of him being allegoric to ant bites. I thought of the food hidden in his room, including tucked into the far side of the mattress, against the wall. I was leaving it all alone, remembering what Dr. Federici had told me about how he would probably always hoard food. It seemed cruel to treat it as a discipline problem, so I had been acting as if I didn't know it was there. But now the prospect of ants crawling over him and biting him as he slept – as I slept – petrified me. You have parent him differently, I thought, as I waited through the morning in the emergency room, you must find a way to keep him safe.

By the time Ilya was released it was lunchtime, as the nurse predicted. We got back to the car and listened carefully for the kitten but heard nothing. I told Ilya to stay off the ground this time, as I peered under the car. No kitten. We popped the hood and looked all around the engine. Still no kitten. Satisfied and relieved that the kitten had escaped and was safe, we got in the car and drove to lunch.

Then I took Ilya to buy a dorm fridge for his bedroom.

*Put everything in here*, I told him when we got it home, *so you don't get bitten overnight, and I find you all swollen up in your bed in the morning.* I thought to myself, *wake up and find you dead from anaphylaxis*, but banished the unthinkable thought the instant it came up.

The refrigerator worked. From then on, he only hoarded food in that fridge.

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## A New Reality October 2009

The month after trying to set his school bathroom on fire, Ilya started to behave in ways unlike anything I had seen from him before. The change was rapid. He challenged me not to tell him what to do, no matter what I said to him, even something as simple as asking him to hand me something in the kitchen. He suddenly became very combative with me almost all the time, but now was simultaneously acting as if he was afraid of me, wincing and turning away if I came anywhere near him. At times, he looked at me as if he didn't know who I was, running to his bedroom and locking the door.

He was still keeping a regular schedule though and did regular things. He left for school in the morning on time. He was still eating on a regular schedule. He watched TV in the evening, turning to the same shows he would regularly watch. He was himself with our cat. Occasionally, I could see his regular self, like when he would tell a self-deprecating joke and laugh at himself, but he was becoming almost giddy now when he did that. No matter what though, I could no longer connect with him. We were sharing the same space, going through a lot of the same motions as we always did, but he was completely within himself.

I noticed as well that he always seemed to be awake at night. No matter how late I stayed up, he was still awake. Usually, I was the last one to bed. No matter how early I woke up, he was up. I couldn't tell if he had slept at all. And he stopped bathing as far as I knew, unless he was bathing when I was at work.

One evening, I became concerned his behavior changes might be caused by illegal drugs. I didn't want him to know what I suspected. I tried asking him when the last time was that he showered, telling him he really should take one. I really wanted him to get him in the shower so I could search his bedroom for drugs. But he exploded at me, yelling he already showered, swinging his arms in the air, demanding to know what type of person I thought he was. I ended up quickly searching when he went to the bathroom a couple hours later. I found nothing.

Then I thought of his medications and worried that maybe some pills got mixed up that the pharmacy. I looked up their pictures on the Internet to make sure that what I had in the bottles looked like they should. Everything looked fine.

At the same time, his teachers were reporting more erratic behavior from him too. He was making random noises during class and pulling his shirt up over his face. He was no longer just the class clown. He was now destroying property for no apparent reason and repeatedly making insulting statements to his classmates. He had become so disruptive that his teachers were assigning him a seat away from the other students in the room. When that failed, they were having him removed from class just so they could teach the remaining students.

One morning after about two weeks into these changes, I went to get my wallet and keys from on top of the microwave in the kitchen where I usually kept them. I noticed right away that my cash was missing. Then I flipped the wallet over and saw that my ATM card was missing. Ilya had just gone out the door to go to the bus stop. I ran out the door and headed in that direction.

I caught up to him at the gate to our development, just as he was turning to head down the main road to his bus stop.

*Ilya*, I called out, trying not to sound hostile.

He spun around and stared at me. He looked maniacal, I thought, his eyes unnaturally wide open and darting around.

*Dude, have you seen my ATM card, I can't find it*, I asked, catching my breath?

He started talking so fast it sounded like another language, though certainly nothing like his native language and he didn't know any other languages. I couldn't understand a word he was saying, but he looked like he was angry and getting ready to hit me. I saw his fists balled up.

*Calm down, Ilya, slow down, I can't understand you*, I said, holding both of my hands up, palms opened towards him. I stood a good six feet away from him, out of reach. I decide it was best not to debate what was obvious to me. I knew he took the cash and the card. Nobody else was in the house.

*I just need my ATM card back – you can keep the cash, no problem, no questions asked*, I said.

*I don't have your card*, he shot back, his speech slowing down just a little bit.

*Come on, dude, I just need the card back. I have to get gas on the way to work. Just give me the card back.*

*No, you can't have my ATM card*, he yelled back at me.

*It's my card*, I responded.

*Why would I have your card? I have my own card*, he yelled.

*That's impossible*, I said, *you don't have a bank account*, I said, still trying to keep my tone of voice neutral.

*I have one*, he insisted, *I found the card on the sidewalk. It's mine.*

At this point, it was clear to me that something was very wrong with him mentally.

*Sorry, I didn't know that, can you just show me the card so I can make sure it wasn't accidentally mixed up with mine*, I asked?



He reached into his pocket, pulled out my ATM card and held it up. He looked at me defiantly.

I squinted at his hand, took a step forward and leaned in. *Oh, I see*, I said, keeping my voice calm, before reaching out and snatching the card from his hand, then jumping back a few feet away from him.

*Give me my fucking card back*, he screamed at me! His arms were at his side, fists clenched again, his chest sticking out.

*Come on, let's just go home, you don't have to go to school today*, I said, stepping backwards, *everything is going to be ok*.

*Fuck you! Fuck you, asshole, I'm not going anywhere with you*, he yelled at me! He turned and ran off down the sidewalk towards his bus stop.

I was frightened, completely unsure what was going on with my son or even what to do in the moment. I was confused even by my own choices. Why did you need to get the ATM card back so badly, I asked myself?

I stood on the sidewalk for a moment and considered my options. I figured if I pursued him, he would either try to fight me or run. Neither seemed like a good choice. If he got on the bus, he would get to school, and the school would soon call me for intervention. We could get him help from there. So, I just needed to keep my phone available if that happened.

Maybe I should call the police, I asked myself? And tell them what, I asked myself further, that your son teenage son took cash from daddy's wallet? How many kids do that? You did that yourself when you were a kid. Or maybe tell them my son seems to be mentally ill but was last seen heading to the bus stop like he would any other day and is in no known danger? I decided that calling the police would just frustrate them and me.

If Ilya didn't get on the bus, he would probably just return to our house, as long as he didn't see my car outside. But what if he didn't get on the bus and went somewhere else instead? That could be dangerous in his state of mind. I decided that I needed to know if he got on the bus or not. I went to my car and waited until just a minute before the bus was due to be at the stop. I drove then past the bus stop. When I arrived though nobody was there. The bus had apparently already been there and left.

I got out of my car and looked around, peering into the nearby woods. Seeing nothing, I drove next to the shopping center next door, figuring that would be his first destination if he didn't get on the bus. He still had the cash from my wallet, so he might want to buy something. There was no sign of him anywhere around the plaza. I walked through the entire grocery store. He wasn't there.

I double back to the house and checked to see if he somehow went back there without me noticing. He wasn't there. So, I got back into my car and drove towards the school, figuring I would be

getting a call anyway so I might as well be nearby. I stopped for coffee and waited in the parking lot.

But no call came by the time classes would be starting, so I called the school and said I just wanted to make sure that he got there. The voice on the phone said he would check with Ilya's first period teacher. After being on hold for several minutes, he returned. *Mr. Dolce, I spoke to Ilya's teacher. He's in class. Anything else I can do for you today?*

I thought for a moment. *Not that I can think of, thank you.*

I called Dr. K's office next but was told he was in with a patient. *Please have him call me as soon as possible*, I asked his assistant. *He has a break at 11*, she said.

That felt like too long to wait. And what do I do if the school calls earlier than that?

*It's kind of urgent*, I said, *I do need to speak with him today.*

*I'll let him know, but he has patients*, she said.

It felt like forever, but he called at eleven.

I told him everything that had happened in the past two weeks and how everything escalated that morning. *I don't recognize my son*, I said.

Dr. K said he needed to see Ilya after school. He wasn't sure what was happening but said it could be an adverse reaction to his medications, or emergence of a schizophrenia or a schizoaffective disorder, maybe bipolar disorder, or something else.

He asked me if Ilya had used any illegal drugs. *Not as far as I know*, I said.

*Well, we'll have to check for that*, he replied.

No call came from the school the rest of the day, which really surprised me. I decided about thirty minutes before school let out that I should pick him up there, too worried to wait for the bus. I had no idea if he would get on it, get off at the right stop or how he would react if he saw me at the stop waiting for him. At least by picking him up at school, there would be people around to help out if he got out of control. And if something had gone wrong during the day, I assumed they would tell me. So, I went into the main office and asked that he be released early to go to a doctor's appointment.

The receptionist looked up Ilya's schedule and then called the classroom before offering me a seat in the waiting area. Minutes later Ilya walked in and approached me, almost expressionless. He stared at me for a moment and asked why I was there.

*You have a doctor's appointment*, I said.

*You didn't tell me that*, he replied, sounding suspicious.

*I forgot – sorry*, I said, *let's go or we'll be late*. I started walking to the door. He didn't follow me.

*Which doctor*, he called out to me?

I turned around. *Just Dr. K*, I said, *just needs to renew your meds*. I waived him in my direction.

He started walking. *Thank God*, I thought, and we headed out the door.

During the short drive, neither of us said anything. We walked silently into the office building and took a seat in the waiting room. Moments later, Dr. K emerged and invited Ilya into his office, motioning for me to stay where I was.

I couldn't focus on any of the magazines that surrounded me. I picked up and put down several for the half hour it took before Dr. K's door opened again. Normally, he would invite me in to join the two of them, but this time he brought Ilya out and told him to take a seat. He asked me to come with him.

I sat down in the soft chair aside his desk. It enveloped me as I sank into it. That felt odd, too comfortable with all the anxiety running through me. I sat up and pulled myself to the edge so I could sit upright.

Dr. K shared his thoughts right away. *He says he's not on drugs and I don't think he is, but we should do a blood test just to be sure*, he began. *I do think he's developing bipolar disorder or a schizoaffective disorder, probably bipolar, I can't be certain just yet. I also can't rule out it's just a problem with his medications. We will need to discontinue them all and let them vacate his system fully. It'll take about two weeks. Bring him back to see me then and we'll start over, probably add a mood stabilizer and then keep his ADHD medication.*

*What should I do in the meantime, it's been really crazy*, I asked?

*Just do the best you can. Try to keep things as low key as possible, don't push him on the homework or pressure him about school. Just keep the peace as much as possible*, he said.

I took Ilya home. His affect was largely flat the rest of the day. The next morning, I sent him off to school without his medications, as Dr. K instructed.

This time, I got a call from the school by mid-day. It was the assistant principal.

*Your son is with me*, she said. *He's had a horrible day but he's telling me he didn't get his meds this morning. I don't want to discipline him if that's the case. Did you forget them?*

I explained everything to her. I told her it would be about two weeks before he would be back on medication.

*Well, if that's the case, she said, I'm not sure we can keep him in the classroom. He's too disruptive. He can't even focus on a conversation with me and I'm right in front of him. We can make other arrangements if we have to, but maybe you should ask his doctor what we should do here. In the meantime, can you come get him?*

*I can be there in half an hour. And I'll call the doctor,* I assured her.

After I called him, Dr. K restored the attention deficit disorder medication for the next two weeks to try to help Ilya stay focused during the day. He kept the rest of the plan in place.

Two weeks later, Dr. K confirmed a bipolar diagnosis and put Ilya on a mood stabilizer. *It could take a month to take full effect,* Dr. K cautioned me, *you won't see results right away.*

I didn't want to believe it would take that long to work, wanting to get the first pill into Ilya as soon as possible. He was sitting right next to me, but I hadn't seen my true son for at least two months. So, I drove the prescription to the pharmacy across the street from Dr. K's office immediately, pulling up to the drive through window. I knew the pharmacist by now having been in so regularly for so many years. He told me to come back in about four hours.

*That long, David,* I asked, my voice incredulous and hostile? I never did that before. I never challenged how long it would take. I felt terrible the minute I said it. I always just came back when David told me to or even later. He looked surprised at my reaction. The anxiety must have shown on my face.

*All right, for you, Michael, gimme an hour,* he said. *It's the best I can do. We're really backed up in here.*

Not wanting to go home without the pills, I took Ilya to get a sandwich at one of his favorite lunch places, while I counted the minutes to an hour. I went inside the pharmacy this time, so I could apologize to David. He waived it off. *No problem, man,* he said.

I rushed home with the medication and watched Ilya take the first pill. He wandered off after swallowing it. I stood at the kitchen counter and said a prayer, asking God for my son back.

Dr. K was correct, it took about a month for the medication to take full effect, but I started to experience Ilya as his true self again in just about two weeks. It was gradual, but by Christmas our days were once again marked by jokes and laughter. With the new year upon us, Ilya showed renewed interest in succeeding in school, telling me that his New Year's resolution was to do better in school, get A's and B's. I reminded him that he only needed to do his best, even if his best was a C.

And I asked him if he could guess my New Year's resolution.

*Same one as always,* he asked?

*Yep*, I said.

*Your New Year's resolution is you're not going to start smoking, duh*, he said, laughing before he could get the whole sentence out.

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Lessons  
March 2010

I welcomed the quiet of the new semester. Ilya's medication seemed to have stabilized him. We went about our daily lives with no major upsets. Reports from school were of mixed academic success, but no behavior problems they couldn't manage and no need for the police or assistant principal to intervene in anything. I hadn't been late for work or called away from work for a few months and that was a relief.

But very early one Wednesday morning in late March, well before sunrise, loud noises from downstairs of our home woke me up. Unsure of whether the sounds were of anything dangerous, I grabbed the night stick from under my bed and cautiously walked down the stairs, peering over the rail as I did, listening intently trying to figure out the noise and where it was coming from. Not seeing anything, it dawned on me that I should check to be sure Ilya was in his bed, so I retreated up the stairs and saw his bed empty.

The sounds were getting louder and as I went back down the stairs to see what he was doing. I could hear more clearly that the noise was outside the front door. I got to it and saw that it was unlocked. I looked through the peephole to make sure that nobody was out there with him. I saw nothing, so I opened it to find Ilya crouched down, his back to me, leaning over something with a lighter. I bent over to look past him as he swung his head around to look over his shoulder at me.

*Oh, Dad,* he said. He had a large remote-control car in flames in front of him.

*What are you doing,* I demanded? I didn't wait for an answer. I promptly retreated back into the house to get a pan of water to douse the flames.

When I returned, he was staring into the flames, which he did until I put the fire out.

*You do realize it's the middle of the night,* I asked? *And what are you doing playing with fire? Haven't we had enough of that?*

*Dude, I was just messing with it, I found the lighter outside yesterday,* he said.

*But it's the middle of the night,* I repeated. *Did you at least think to take the battery out,* I asked? *They can explode in your face when exposed to flames. Or did it already explode on you?*

*It didn't explode, Dad.*

*Give me the lighter. Go back to bed. You have school in the morning,* I said, *and I have to go to work.*

I thought about it throughout the day and asked a few friends what to do. All agreed that Ilya's obsession with fire could prove to be really dangerous and the fact that he was up in the middle of the night setting things on fire felt like just that, an obsession. One friend suggested that even though he was now sixteen, maybe Ilya simply didn't understand what the consequences could be. He was developmentally delayed, and his maturity still lagged his chronological age by at least a few years.

I decided that I should confront the issue with him. I sat him down that night and asked him if he knew what injuries he could have suffered if the remote-control car battery had blown up and sent flames onto him.

*I'd get burned, of course, he said.*

*Yes, but do you know what those burns can look like, I asked?*

*Maybe black, he responded?*

*That can happen, I said, but do you know what the burns can look like?*

*Maybe black, he said again?*

*That's not what I mean, do you know what they look like after they heal?*

*Not really, he said.*

*I want to show you, I said, so you can understand the risk you are taking. There are photos on the Internet. They are pretty graphic, could upset you, or at least upset your stomach. Will you look at them with me?*

I expected him to say no, deny that he was at any risk, claim he was in control of the fire he played with, maybe argue nothing had happened in the past, so no need to worry. But instead, he agreed to look at them.

I opened my laptop, placed it on the coffee table in front of us and went to a burn center web site.

I started with pictures showing the different degrees of burns, each one more severe than the one before it. Then I flipped to photos of severe burns on different parts of the body, legs and arms first, then the neck and face.

Next, I showed him the scars left behind after treatment. *See this, I asked? This person will not get any better. That's a scar. See how the skin looks stretched tight and flat, all pale, that's what's left behind after the wound heals. Look at that guy's face, that could be you, I said, pointing to the screen. This is what you are risking, I said, this is why I am so concerned about how you play with fire.*

*I'm too good looking to end up looking like that, he said. I'll stop. Gotta look good for the babes.*



Despite his joke, it looked like he was taking it all seriously. I thought I had made an impact and was hopeful he could be true to his word and was done playing with fire, but I was still worried that he was up in the middle of the night. I thought back to the weeks leading up to his bipolar diagnosis, how I couldn't tell if he slept at all. Perhaps I will call Dr. K, I told myself.

I put it all out of my mind though shortly after that, when I got such a hopeful note from his science teacher. She wrote,

I am writing to you today to let you know how proud I am of Ilya! During science class last week, we researched planets in order to make presentations to the class. Ilya worked diligently during class work periods, even on days when his partner did not come to school. As part of the project, he successfully created a poster for his presentation. Today in class it was his turn to present. He had previously spoken to me and let me know that he wanted to present alone if his partner was not present, and so he did. Ilya did a TERRIFIC job! His solo presentation appeared practiced and he spoke loudly and clearly, even fielding unpracticed questions from the audience! Ilya was confident and rarely had to refer to his poster for answers.

That was the young man that I knew Ilya could be. *You just have to be patient with him*, I told myself, *he'll come into his own, in his time, in his way.*

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Not Mine, Be Done  
April 2010

Dolce began telling lawmakers [his] story six years ago ... The effort has met resistance for years from the Roman Catholic Church. Gov. Charlie Crist said recently he would sign it into law. ... The bill won approval this year with help from victims like Dolce and Lauren Book-Lim, the 25-year-old daughter of lobbyist Ron Book. ... "There is no statute of limitations to a victim's suffering," she said after watching the unanimous votes in the House and Senate. Dolce watched, too. Even though he had told his painful story numerous times before as he pushed the bill for the past six years, hearing it recounted once more on the Senate floor before the vote brought him to tears.

"Time Limits Will End to File Sex-Abuse Cases"  
*The Miami Herald*  
April 27, 2010

Our fight to make sure that Patti's son Jeff did not die in vain, to repeal Florida's statutes of limitation on civil and criminal prosecution of child sex crimes, came to an end more than six years after it started, in the early evening hours of April 26, 2010. As I drove into Tallahassee that week for the final efforts to get the legislation passed, I turned the volume all the way up one last time to blast the theme song Ilya picked out for us. I was so proud of his spirit and determination and felt so inspired by him. He was right, they couldn't stop us, they couldn't hold us back. We had the truth on our side. I was certain that the week had finally come that Florida would protect kids first.

The morning of April 26, I watched from the House gallery as Representative Dorworth called for passage of his legislation. "This bill sends two messages. Stay out of our state and stay the hell away from our kids," he said to the chamber. The House responded with a unanimous vote in favor of the bill, sending it to the Senate.

Sitting in the Senate gallery waiting for the bill to be called up for final passage that evening, I prayed for the last time, *May Thy will, not mine, be done*. Another unanimous vote followed, and the bill was off to the Governor to be signed into law. Our opponents didn't muster a single vote. I left the gallery and called Patti, tearfully telling her, "Patty, we did it. Jeff did not die in vain. His story has been told. Thousands of children will be saved as a result."

After the Senate session adjourned for the afternoon, I went around each floor of the Senate Office Building to say thank you to all of the supporters I could find. The Senator who presided over the final committee that heard the bill shook my hand when I found him walking down the hall, smiling as he congratulated me. Then he became solemn and said, *You did good work here, Michael. I hope you find peace in this victory. I've worried about you this whole time, how haunted you are by your past. It's time to go home to your kids now. I'm sure they've miss you. God bless.*

Ilya and Sarah got some of the biggest hugs I ever gave them when I got home the next day, as we rejoiced together in our family's victory.

22

## Doing for Others Summer 2010

I got out of my car at the Habitat for Humanity construction site and saw my son walking across a roof, his tool belt strapped to his waist, a hammer in his hand. He was a young man now, about to turn seventeen. His pride was obvious as he saw me and waived.

“Hey, Dad,” he called out to me.

He was very excited once he clambered to the ground to tell me all he had learned about roofing that day, pointing across the rooftop to where he had spent the afternoon. He looked happy. And not the slightest bit tired despite his physical labors beneath a south Florida summer sun.

I had worked Habitat projects too, several years earlier alongside other law students in weekend projects I helped organize, but only a single home at a time. Ilya had joined a project building a whole row of homes. And he was working with a full-time crew. The most I ever did on those job sites, painting and hammering a few things up, was not nearly as strenuous as building a roof. And I was exhausted, nonetheless, by the end of the day. My son was stronger than I ever was, and the foreman had to insist Ilya stop working, for safety, as the temperature rose high in the afternoon to levels that could induce heat stroke. Ilya was eager that entire summer he volunteered to return the next day.

We talked on the way home about the families whose lives would be so profoundly changed by his labors. He spoke to me of having met, a few days earlier, a single mother and her young children when they visited the site, whose walls he had helped frame out for drywall. He was so happy for the family that their home was just weeks away from completion. As much as he had volunteered originally to gain work experience to see if he wanted to pursue construction as a career, the mission of Habitat touched him deeply. He experienced being part of something greater than himself.

When the summer was done and we were driving home from the worksite for the final time, I asked him, *So, is a career in construction for you?*

*Nah*, he said simply, *too hot out. I'll work inside*. I laughed. Not once all summer had he complained of the heat. But it made clear to me that the mission was what drove him, that kept him coming back to volunteer every day until it was time to return to school.

It would not be the last time though that he would gladly endure a blazing Florida sun to labor for a cause. About two years later, as I entered the courtyard between our church and the church staff office building where I was headed, I found him glistening with sweat, swinging a pickaxe into the ground, digging up overgrown bushes.

Ilya looked up at me, smiling broadly before he even saw that it was me clanking open the gate. “Hey, Dad,” he said cheerfully. I was surprised to see him. I had no idea he would be there. He was an adult now, still shared a home with me, but often didn’t tell me what he was doing. I never pushed for details when he started venturing into the world on his own. Finding his own way felt very important to him, he told me. And there was more to it, I believed, than simply a young man wanting to feel accomplished by standing on his own two feet.

Dr. Federici’s words stuck with me over the years. Parent him differently. Let him fall. Let him learn from his own choices. But as I saw my son stand on his own in his young adulthood, find his own way, create moments for his own smiles, I started to feel differently about Dr. Federici’s advice. Where I once dreaded each fall, I could now embrace the end result of those falls. My son was making good choices, empowering choices, choices that proved the essence of his loving self. He owned those moments because they were truly his; they were not just him doing what I told him he should do. They were him. And they were beautiful.

That afternoon Ilya was helping our church sexton, Brian, clear out the entire space of the courtyard to create a memorial garden, with a columbarium wall. The project had been planned for years and was finally underway. I could see before he even looked up to greet me that he was relishing in his triumph over the weeds and plants he was digging up. In time, the space was fully cleared, an ornate stone and brick patio laid down with palm trees neatly arranged around its perimeter, manicured plant beds installed to the sides and rear, with stone benches and a fountain gently bubbling at one end.

On my next trip through that courtyard, a couple months later, the weeds all gone and the ornate pavers all in place, I found him there again. This time he was seated on the ground, alone, in front of the concrete shell of the columbarium. He was assembling the pieces of the front covers for each recess that would receive the urns in the years to come.

“Hey, Dad,” he said to me with a smile. He then told me how many spaces for urns he was framing out, how many were done, how many were left. He was proud of how fast he was getting through the project.

I found myself especially proud of his commitment to the community we shared together, the community of faith that was so much part of my experience raising him, where I had sought to teach him by my words and my example about commitment to God, about the strength that can come from banding together with others of faith. He was walking the road that I had worked so deliberately to show him, to guide him to for his own strength. He came to our church, as an adult now, on his own, without me even knowing, so that he could volunteer and make our spiritual home even better than it was already. I could see before me that my son was getting it.

In my pride and satisfaction, not for one second did I imagine that I was witnessing my child frame out his own grave, that in the not too distant future I would bury my son in that wall. And that it would be there that my faith in God would be crushed.

23

## Kids Like Him Fall 2010

As the fall of 2010 was upon us, there was much in our lives to feel good about. It had been almost a year since Ilya tried to set the school bathroom on fire, and but for him burning the remote control car in the middle of the night in the spring, there had been no other fire incidents. Ilya had a great summer at Habitat for Humanity, just after we took another great Florida road trip and also flew to St. Louis to be with my older brother, who was now a Catholic monk in a monastery in St. Louis, be ordained as a priest. The children loved their time with their “Uncle Brother Father Doctor Deacon Joe Linus,” as they called him, encapsulating all the titles he had earned to that moment.

I was mindful though of one particular challenge that Ilya faced in the fall. He had failed all but two of his classes, so he was effectively starting ninth grade over, which I knew he would find embarrassing at seventeen years of age. So, we rehearsed the night before school started in mid-August how to respond to questions and handle any frustration he felt if he was ridiculed for having to repeat the grade.

Nonetheless, I feared the worst for him. But as the new school year got underway, Ilya said he liked his teachers and the progress reports from school were good. I had become accustomed from prior years to the beginning of school starting out bumpy, with a host of complaints about his new teachers as he tried to get used to them and instinctively, it seemed, wanting to challenge their authority or show off to try to impress his classmates, to get their attention and try to make friends.

With good reports from the teachers and him talking daily about wanting to get good grades and all the new friends he was making as the school year began, I was relieved. He seemed really happy. With the problems Ilya seemed to have in the past couple years making real friends, mainly because so many of them were maturing faster than him, it was good to hear that friendships were now working for him. Maybe, I thought, with new friends, he wouldn’t feel so alone, would fit in better and not dwell so much on the loss of his birth family.

But within less than a month, I was turning to his therapist, Cindy, for help, informing her that his poor choices were returning and even worsening daily. His new teachers were checking in with me trying to figure out what was going wrong after such a good start. As I tried to talk to him each evening over dinner about the calls I was getting, I found it harder than ever to get Ilya's attention at all. He denied everything his teachers said about not doing classwork and claimed he had no homework or did it already at school. I knew better. I even found some of the homework papers in the garbage can, again, completely blank.

Two weeks after that, I got another call from the school, this time from the special education department at his school. I knew something was wrong, again, by the tone of voice that came through the phone. I was relieved though that this time I was not asked to leave my office right away to go to the school. So, not an emergency, thankfully. Instead, I was asked to come in the

next afternoon for a parent-teacher conference in the special education department office. We needed to talk, I was told, about why Ilya was chronically late for class and no longer turning in his schoolwork at all, in any of his classes.

That evening, as I arrived home from work, finding him slouched down on the sofa watching TV, I asked him, *So, why am I going to your school tomorrow for a parent-teacher conference?* He denied to me that he knew what was going on, saying he had just been late for class a couple times because his locker was too far from his classes. He wasn't convincing, but I figured it was best to let it go until the next day, so we made dinner and watched a show together.

When I arrived at the school, Ilya was already sitting with the special education director at a small conference table. She looked from him to me and back again. He had an oddly sheepish look on his face. I took a seat.

*We've been having a little chat*, the director began. *Ilya would like to share something with you*, she said, fixing her gaze on him now.

Ilya confessed that he had been late for class not once or twice, but a lot, and not because his locker was too far from class. His customers were too far from his classes, he explained. He had started a candy company, he told me. Palm Beach Central High School was large, with about three thousand students on a sprawling campus. He was making a business of selling candy in between classes to students and even many teachers. He set himself up on the side of campus farthest from the bookstore, which was his competition. He figured out it was too far for those students to get to the bookstore and back to class in time, so they would buy from him. He was selling a few dozen bars a day, raking in upwards of a hundred dollars a day.

*Where'd you get the money in the first place for all that candy*, I asked? I always tried to keep Ilya's cash on hand limited, fearful he would get into some kind of trouble with it. He explained his seed money was a gift card he got for his birthday from his aunt, which was just after school started. He bought a bunch of candy with it, which he then re-sold in between classes to other students. He was buying the large packs of full-size candy bars to sell, marking up the per bar price for his customers by double or triple what he was paying for it.

*After school*, he explained, *I go to the grocery store and buy more for the next day's sales*.

This was pretty smart, I thought to myself. I didn't have a lick of business sense myself, but he had figured out the basics for a simple business, a product that would sell, figuring out the competition's weakness, a large profit margin. I found myself proud of him, not the emotion I had expected to feel when I first walked into the room.

I leaned towards him. *Dude, what are you doing with the profits*, I asked?

*Mainly, I take my friends to Steak 'n Shake*, he answered, smiling like a child, though sitting before me in a young man's body of seventeen. The restaurant was just outside our development, a couple hundred yards from his bus stop.



*Are you paying for everyone, burgers, friends, shakes,* I asked, a pit growing in my stomach? I was trying to keep my concern off my face.

Yes, he said, without hesitation.

*Every day,* I asked?

*Pretty much,* he said, *they don't have as much money as I do, so I pay.* He added, *we have a great time.*

He was beaming now, but my heart was breaking for him. I knew then why he had such a growing list of friends all of a sudden and I knew it wouldn't continue. I knew most of all that it was an illusion. As soon as he stopped buying food for everyone, his popularity would probably end quickly, and he would feel rejected, again.

*Ilya is going to find so other way to make money,* the director interjected, struggling to hide her impatience now. *He knows he can't continue to be late for class like this.* He nodded, looking deflated. With that, she sent him back to class, asking me to stay behind for a few minutes.

*We really can't meet his needs here,* she said when he was gone. *You should look for another school for him. It doesn't have to be a private school either, there are charter schools for kids like him,* she told me.

I felt anger overtake my heartbreak in the moment. "Kids like him," echoed through my head.

*He doesn't like to feel different,* I told the director. *A mainstream school like this should work for him, you have a large special education department here,* I insisted. *He started the year doing great, he just got off track with this candy company.*

I was pleading now. *He just needs help getting back to how he started the year. He just proved to you that he can do it.*

She was unmoved. *The best place for him would be Believer's Academy,* she continued as if I had said nothing. *It's a charter school. It's just off 45<sup>th</sup> Street. You should take a look at it.*

*I don't think so,* I replied, *I'll get him back on track.* I was determined now to prove her wrong, struggling to restrain my anger.

*It's up to you,* she said, handing me a piece of paper that she had scribbled "Believer's Academy" on. *We'll do what we can if you leave him here but think about it. He really needs a special school.*

When I arrived home that night, Ilya was waiting for me in the family room. He asked if I was angry at him.

I sat down next to him. I looked at him for a moment, saying nothing. After a pause, *I am*, I said, sternly, *but not because you were running a secret business*.

*And I'm not even upset at you for being late for class*, I added.

*Then what is it*, he asked, looking very confused, *my grades?*

*No*, I told him. I paused, staring at him, trying hard to hide the grin I was feeling. *You don't know*, I asked?

*No, Dad.*

*I'm just upset you bought everyone a cheeseburger, but never bought one for your old man.*

He burst out laughing and I joined in. *Come on, I said, get in the car. We're going to Steak 'n Shake.*

I paid.

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## A Place of His Own Winter 2011

In the weeks that followed the end of his candy business, Ilya continued to talk to me each evening in our family room of the next new business he could start. He had many ideas. We talked through each one, as I guided him gently to his own conclusion that he was not quite equipped to succeed with it the way he had his first business.

He refused all the while to return focus to his homework. Word from the school was that his classwork was not faring much better. Even though he was seventeen years old and had successfully only accomplished an eighth grade education, leaving me very anxious to find a way to get him on a path to success as soon as possible, I took a breath and gave him some space before confronting him after a few weeks. I wanted to give him some time to readjust to life without the money he had been making and adjust to the fact that all the friends he had made while picking up the afternoon snack tab would fade away, as they did quickly. It was something he avoided talking about with me.

He responded defiantly when I started to stress the need to get back on track, to pass his classes and get to graduation. *Why should I do all that work*, he asked?

It was already clear that he would not likely graduate high school in four years, but I didn't mention that. Instead, I encouraged him to focus on how graduation would lead to job opportunities, where he could make even more money. I painted a rosy picture of getting his own apartment, being independent, going wherever he wanted to. I showed him on the Internet that people with high school diplomas made so much more than those without one.

He reminded me that I told him about Bill Gates and Steve Jobs.

*They didn't finish college. They did finish high school*, I replied.

But his fixation would not change. *I just need to start another company and make money again*, he said to me, every time we got to any depth in the conversation. His frustration was palpable.

A full month went by and I could see he was finding no hope in his school, that he was not making any real friends and felt more alone than ever. I could see that the struggle would not get better, for him or for us. So, I surrendered my anger at the special education director and came to accept that my son did need to be somewhere else, somewhere designed for him, not a place designed for others with just a carve out to fit himself into.

I called the special education director back. I had thrown away her note. *Could I get the name again of that charter school*, I asked her? *Believer's Academy*, she reminded me, *I can give you the number*.

When I called, the directors at Believers Academy were happy to schedule a time for me to meet them at their school. They were two special education teachers who had founded the school. I could feel their faith in each student who passed by as we met, their confidence that they could get each one, no matter their disabilities, to see their own potential and reach it. They believed they could help every student become independent adults and they had the track record to prove it. Their positive energy was inspiring.

I saw the dignity of the school, as students like my son were introduced to me and spoke with pride about the jobs they were holding, the checklist they were completing on their way to graduation. And I could see that the students loved each other. Like my son where he was, they might well be social cast offs and isolated in any other school. But in that building, they were peers lifting each other up. None of them were alone. It was where Ilya needed to be, I was certain. And they were sure they could help my son.

I went home, anxious to tell Ilya all about it. I took him out to dinner to talk to him about the school, unable to control my excitement for even the short car ride to the restaurant. I launched right into telling him what I had learned about Believers Academy. As soon as he heard it was an all special education school, he wanted nothing to do with it

*I started my own business, Dad, he insisted, I don't need a special school. There's nothing wrong with me.*

The debate continued as we ordered dinner. It was a practical life skills education, I told him, not an academic one. It will no longer be about math homework, but about learning to make a budget for your first apartment, balancing a checkbook or how to shop for a car. No more endless reading homework and book reports, instead how to read and fill out a job application, I explained to him. He ate the chips and salsa, shaking his head no the whole time. *I'm not going*, he kept repeating.

But by the time the burritos arrived, Ilya was sold on the idea. The turning point was learning that within a few months of enrolling, the school would help him get a job, a real one where he would be paid like any other worker. I told him about the relationships they had with employers all over the county that hired their students. *The school will stay in touch with your boss, make sure everything is going well, but otherwise, you'll just be working like anyone else*, I explained.

*Wait, Dad, you're saying I get to work during the school day, and get paid?*

*Yes, most days. Just some time at school to work on job and life skills, but eventually most of your time you will be at work and making money.*

*I get to keep the money, he asked me, I don't have to give it to them?*

I laughed. *Of course, it's yours*, I assured him.

*I can spend it on anything I want*, he asked, incredulous at the prospect?

*No drugs*, I said, smiling, *but you can buy me a cheeseburger. Finally.*

He laughed.

*So, we can go look at it,* I asked?

*Of course,* he exclaimed! It was the first I had seen him hopeful in a long time.

Ilya was welcomed into Believers Academy at the beginning of the next semester.

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## Treading Water Spring 2011

Ilya's therapist Cindy had other patients at his new school. Though she was not employed at the school, she was allowed to meet with them individually and as a group there. Cindy was also able to talk directly to the students' teachers and the school administrators, giving her up to date and accurate information about how they were doing. I was encouraged by it all. Not only were all of Ilya's peers special education students like him, but many would also now have a therapist in common. Any problems among them could be worked out with her help. I believed that it would help Ilya feel less different from his peers than ever before. It would be the norm among his friends to have to spend time with a therapist.

As he settled into his new school, Ilya was anxious to get a real job. But before the school would help him get one, they wanted him to make progress with his social skills and completing assignments consistently and on time, weaknesses they identified when he first started with them that could doom any job. He had to prove to them that he was ready.

Ilya continued to show great interest in any hands-on tasks around the school that looked more like a job and gave him a positive immediate result, like running the school cafeteria at lunch time, which the teachers oversaw to teach basic job skills, everything from how to operate a cash register to how to interact with others on a schedule. He also relished learning small engine repair and automotive detailing, tasks that looked and felt like a regular job.

But in short order, he started to lag behind in the limited academic and classwork expected of him, not fully appreciating that it was all specifically designed to teach him essential job and life skills that he would need. Unlike at his prior school though, nobody at Believers Academy was isolating him or feeling helpless in figuring out how to intervene. The teachers and administrators alike always remained confident that they would make progress with Ilya, in time, and kept their expectations and standards for him high. From the outside looking in, it felt to me that for the first time he was being seen only for his potential and proven abilities, not his limitations or delays or problems.

Their outlook gave me real hope even as Ilya faltered the second quarter, turning in as little as one in four assignments in certain classes. All the while, his poor social skills continued to get in his way, despite his strong desire to make friends. His teachers told me that he was still annoying his classmates with his efforts to be the center of attention, interrupting classes while they were working towards their goals. They, like him, wanted to get a real job. But most had already accepted that they had to do the basic work at school of developing job skills to qualify to get a real job.

At times, he even came across as offensive to his peers. He seemed conditioned from years of never really feeling that he fit in to reacting to his classmates the same way he always had when he felt they did not accept him. His actions showed that he had a belief that he had to stand out to

be accepted, to be the funniest and to command attention at all times in order to be accepted as a friend and an equal. It would take time, his teachers told me, for him to learn a new way to get along and connect with others and to feel that he belonged among them. But we all agreed that Believers Academy was where he needed to be to get there.

Through the semester, I tried to leave the pressure to get his classwork and homework done to his teachers and to Cindy. I felt more than ever that the best thing I could do was focus on how he felt about himself on the dawn of his adulthood. He was going to turn eighteen in the summer. I worried that he would dwell on that birthday and feel disappointed in himself and alienated from everyone. He was going to be an adult with no end to high school in sight.

I asked him over several dinners out, just the two of us, how he felt about how his life was going. He sounded very hopeful about Believers Academy and getting a real job. But when I asked at other times how he felt about how the rest of the family was doing, how he compared himself to them became clear. While he said he was happy for everyone, he expressed a lot of resentment. He praised his little sister's hard work and success but emphasized that as he struggled through special education classes, he had to listen to everyone praise her "constantly" for excelling with ease in gifted ones. She didn't struggle the way he did, and he knew that.

His beloved cousins, Ryan and Rebecca, thrived too, top of their classes, one even a high school valedictorian. Both were off to prestigious colleges in other states. I tried to get Ilya to focus on how devoted they were to him, how they kept him close, made time for his favorite things, to take him to movies and play video games together. Truly, they celebrated his successes, no matter how small, as if he had moved a mountain. They were empathetic and their love was authentic, but he continued to measure himself against them. He wanted to graduate and leave the state too, to achieve big things, to stand out as they did.

I worried as he told me all this. From all that I had read, many adoptees feel that they were "picked out special" by their adoptive family, so they must continue as they grow to be "special" in the eyes of their adoptive family members in order to keep their place among those who are bound by blood. I had been careful never to tell Ilya that I picked him out for any reason, whether special or just a child with needs I could meet. The truth was, he wasn't "picked out." The process didn't work that way and I wouldn't have wanted it to. But that didn't seem to stop him from feeling as if he had been.

I told Ilya outright that he didn't have to compete with his family, that he belonged and was loved like everyone else without having to be a lawyer like his dad or a budding scientist like his sister, or a straight A student like his cousins. *You just need to be yourself, we love you for just being you.* I told him.

I wanted him to understand too that he was more than loved, that he was respected and admired too. I praised him for his successes, especially where my shadow did not cast itself. I pointed out that he could go fishing and catch fish while I would starve trying to get dinner that way. His grandfather had taught him how and he was good at it. Everything else that I could think of that made him stand out, I listed for him. He could balance on skateboards that I would tumble from and land in an emergency room. He sat with patience and empathy talking to the aged and infirm



where I would struggle even to keep my thoughts present. He had learned a lot about construction and tools, where I could hope for little more than hanging a picture straight. I did not say to him, but knew that he was authentic in his weaknesses, letting all know who he was, where I would put on a mask to hide my true self.

Ilya kept responding by saying that he knew he didn't need to compete with his family or get straight A's, but moments later he would start rattling off what he intended to do, to succeed, detailing his plans to start a successful business, sharing the latest idea he was going to pursue. There was nothing ordinary about his plans.

As the weeks wore on, he continued to perform erratically at school. I decided we had made good progress expressing his feelings, so I would rejoin his teachers and therapist in encouraging him to do his schoolwork, connecting it with getting a job that he really wanted. I started checking in with him every few days, asking pointed questions about completing his work.

He never wanted to hear from me about his schoolwork and pushed back at my inquiries. Often his retort was a simple youthful, *don't tell me what to do or why don't you trust me to do it myself?* Or, *you don't know everything just because you're older.* Only once did he say what I always expected to hear, *You're not my real dad anyway.* Just beneath the fury on his face I could see his regret as the words tumbled out. But his feelings were betrayed despite his desire not to hurt me that way.

In an effort to justify to Ilya why I pushed him, I told him that it was my job before I died to make sure that he had learned how to stand up on his own two feet, to be able to care for and provide for himself. And I told him why I saw it as necessary. "I get to die first." I said this to him many times when he was not doing his best for himself.

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## The Best Hugs 2012

*You give the best hugs, Ilya*, Mandy said to him, the first time they hugged.

I met Mandy, who was also a lawyer, at work. In time, our friendship grew into something more. We went on our first date on New Year's Eve 2011. A few months later, I wanted her to meet my children.

I introduced Ilya to Mandy at our favorite Tex-Mex restaurant. Mandy understood Ilya right away. Aside from being inherently a very caring person and a woman of deep faith in God, always looking to care for others, she had represented many youths in foster care who had developmental and emotional disabilities. She understood their trauma and their needs. She spoke to Ilya right away on his level. I could see them connect immediately.

That first meeting turned into regular contact as we got together over the next year, including many hours at her home, where Ilya loved to go swimming and eat all the food that Mandy, a skilled cook, made for us, as well as the tremendous desserts she baked. Ilya was never without a smile with Mandy around. She joined our church too and became involved in our Sunday school class. She then took over leading the coffee hour after service, amazing everyone with her cooking and baking and welcoming presentation, as she decorated the church hall and serving table each week. In short order, coffee hour attendance doubled.

Through it all, our lives came to center around each other, and she became "Mama Mandy" to Ilya. He called her that first, on his own and she welcomed it. It was the first time in his life that he lay claim to a maternal relationship himself, not a relationship that was given to him by birth or adoption. He wanted that relationship, and he needed that relationship.

Ilya opened up to her, telling her everything he felt and everything that was going on in his life. He talked to her about all of his struggles alongside his hopes. Many times, she would come to me and tell me how he felt about me, the good and the bad, including anything that I was doing that bothered him, especially when he felt controlled by what I told him he should do or what he perceived I wanted from him.

It became clear to me that Ilya shared more with Mandy about his feelings than he did with me. They talked about everything from school to friends to his family to his medications. He had no reserve with her. He trusted her and relied on her and loved her as a son would a mother.

The more time she spent with him, the more I saw his self-confidence grow. By the spring, while he still lagged in his classroom work, Ilya was in his first job internships, one at an office supply company delivering and assembling furniture with a crew, and the other cleaning yachts at a shipyard. He received nothing but praise from his supervisors, even earning their trust to train a classmate of his who came in next for an internship.

As 2012 came to a close, Mandy and I were engaged in our church's sanctuary. Ilya could not have been happier to be officially getting a new mom and I could not have been happier for him either. There was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to honor that new relationship and honor my relationship with him too. I couldn't imagine having anyone else on the other side of me from Mandy. *I want you to be the best man at the wedding*, I said to him. He didn't know entirely what that meant but understood it to be an honor and to be very important. We had a lot of hope and a lot of hugs for our new family.

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Man Child  
August 2012

In the evening hours just two days after we celebrated Ilya's nineteenth birthday he told that he was going outside to ride his skateboard.

*Stay where I can see you*, I called out, *it's getting late*.

*Got it*, he called back, and I heard the door close.

After a while, I realized that it had gotten dark outside. I looked out the living room window. Couldn't see him. I went outside, still couldn't see him. I looked up and down the block, couldn't see him. I called out to him. No response.

Ilya had never disappeared like this, never been gone this late or this long without telling me where he was going. Panic started to overwhelm me.

I went back inside and got my car keys, then drove around the whole housing development. There was no sign of him.

I went back to the house to see if he had returned home while I was looking for him. He wasn't there.

By then, I was completely frightened, my thoughts racing about all that could have gone wrong, banishing thought after thought about what might have happened to him.

I drove next to the nearby shopping plaza, thinking maybe he went there to skateboard, maybe ran into someone he knew. If was after ten, so the stores would all be closed, but he could be outside. I drove the plaza twice, even drove around back. There was no sign of him.

Returning to our neighborhood, I saw a Sheriff's deputy patrolling. I pulled over and flagged him down. Through his open car window, I told him, *my son is missing*. I asked, *have you seen him*, holding up a picture on my phone?

*No. He's not answering his phone*, the deputy asked?

*He doesn't have one right now*.

*How old is he?*

*Nineteen. Just turned nineteen*.

*Does he live with you? When did you notice him missing?*

*Yes, he lives with me. He left the house to go skateboarding a couple hours ago. He should be home by now. He's never out this late, I insisted.*

*The deputy shook his head no. He's an adult. We can't do anything for twenty-four hours.*

*I need to explain. He's an adult by age, but he has developmental disabilities, I told him.*

*I can't treat it like a missing persons situation. My sergeant will make me wait twenty-four hours.*

*Please, he has developmental disabilities. He's bipolar. He doesn't function like someone his age. He's still in school. Someone can easily take advantage of him. I can't tell you how out of the ordinary this is, I said, not trying to hide the desperation in my voice.*

*What happened right before he left the house? Did you have an argument or something, he asked me?*

*No, everything was fine.*

*Well, he has no phone with him. Did he get punished – take his phone away, he asked?*

*No, he doesn't have one. He uses an iPad to communicate with friends, and the house phone.*

*Well, then maybe he went to a friend's house. Did you check his friends in the neighborhood?*

*He would have told me that. And he has no friends in this neighborhood. He doesn't make friends easily. His maturity is several years behind his age. Please, if there wasn't a real good reason to be concerned, I wouldn't have flagged you down.*

*OK, I can't treat it like a missing persons, but email me his photo, he said, handing me a business card, and I'll send it to all the deputies in the area. He asked for my phone number and wrote it down.*

*The deputy started tapping his pen on his pad while looking carefully at me. We'll look for him. If we see him, we'll call you. You sure there was no fight between you two, he asked? I'm gonna ask him if I find him, he said.*

*No, no fight. I would tell you that. I appreciate your concern. I'm a lawyer. I know not to lie to the police. I'll send the photo right away.*

*I sent the photo and doubled back to the house to see if he had returned home. Not finding him, I set back out in the car to search. I drove first to the next neighborhood to the south of ours. It was gated. I drove up to the guard shack, told the guard I was looking for my son, and showed him Ilya's photo.*

*Have you seen him, probably on a skateboard, I asked?*

*Nope, but I really don't pay attention to who goes up and down the sidewalk. I just keep track of the cars.*

*Can I go in and look for him?*

*Nope, unless you know someone in here, he replied, does your son have friends in here?*

*No, not to my knowledge. Listen, he's missing. The police are looking for him.*

*I can't let you in. The police can come in, of course. But you can't.*

*He's my son. He has mental disabilities. I have to find him.*

He stared back at me.

*Listen, I said, take my driver's license, you can hold it until I get back. I'm just gonna drive through and see if he's on your sidewalks. It's getting late, you don't want him wandering around in here if he doesn't belong here anyway, do you?*

*Ok, give me the license, he said, sticking out his hand.*

*Thank you so much, I said, handing it over.*

He opened the gate and I drove in. I took the first right and headed slowly down the road between rows of typical south Florida cookie cutter middle class family homes, two story, with a two car garage, each looking like the one before it but for the four or five color options the builder must have provided within a complimentary palate of neutral beiges and browns. The neighborhood was idyllic in so many ways. Each home had a nice size yard, the lawns all neatly manicured, probably maintained by the association, clusters of palm trees and bushes accenting the front of each home. Nice cars in the driveways, all fairly new, most of them family sedans, mini-vans or SUVs. A few basketball hoops dotted the driveways. Many garages were still open, revealing children's bikes and yard toys inside. This was a neighborhood of young families.

About halfway down the road, I could see a few people darting in and out of a garage to my right. One car was in the driveway. As I neared, I saw my son. I let out a breath, relieved to see him ok. I pulled up in front of the driveway. He turned to me and waved. He was smiling and appeared happy.

I stepped out of the car and leaned on the roof. *Dude, it's late, I've been worried about you, I said.*

*I'm just chillin' with my friends, Dad, he replied.*

Two young girls in the garage waved at me. They looked to be about eleven or twelve.

*Say goodbye, Ilya, we gotta go, I said.*

*See ya' next time*, he said to the girls. He kicked up his skateboard and caught it mid-air, then got in the car.

I drove off, anxiously glancing in the rearview mirror. *Who are they? How do you know them*, I asked? *Did you go in their house?*

*I just met them*, he said, *I think they like me. They think I'm cool. They love my skateboard tricks.*

*Do you know their brother or something*, I asked?

*I don't think they have a brother*, he replied.

*Older sister?*

*Don't think so.*

*Where's their parents?*

*They said their parents went out to eat.*

*Ilya, how old are they?*

*Not sure*, he said.

*Ilya, they couldn't have been thirteen*, I said.

*So what?*

*So! You're a grown man! You can't hang out with young girls.*

Ilya fell silent, staring straight ahead. I glanced over at him and saw the smile on his face fade.

*Listen*, I said, *you have to understand, I know they probably liked you, but you're gonna get hurt. Grown men can't chill with young girls. I've had the police out looking for you. It's a good thing I found you first, or they would assume the worst, finding you with such young girls and no parent around.*

He didn't say anything.

*Think about it, your sister is fourteen*, I said insistently. *How would I react if I came home and found her alone with an adult man?*

He had no answer, so I answered myself. *I'd beat the crap out of him! Just like their dad would have done to you if he got home and found you, a strange man, hanging out with his young daughters.*



*We were just in the garage, I didn't go inside, Dad, he countered.*

*It doesn't matter, Ilya. People are going to assume that's just the first step to something not so innocent and you know what I mean. It looks bad. You know the work I do, Ilya. Some grownups hurt kids. Someone's gonna assume that's what you have in mind.*

His chin dropped towards his chest.

*Ilya, I know you wouldn't hurt a kid. I know you didn't mean any harm. But let's be honest. I know it's hard for you to make friends and talk to women your age, but this can't be the solution. I know you want friends and I know you want a girlfriend, but you are an adult now. You can only hang out with other adults or you're gonna get yourself into real trouble.*

*I'm sorry, he said, I didn't mean it. We were just having fun. Just chillin', he said.*

I stopped at the guard shack and got my license back, then drove home. I called the deputy and thanked him, telling him my son was home safely.

*Everything's ok with him, he asked?*

*Yes, he just skateboarded too far.*

*No fighting, he asked?*

*No fighting, deputy. Have a good night. Stay safe. Thank you, again.*

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## First Jobs

Fall 2012 – Spring 2013

After the great success in his internships, it was time for Ilya to get his first real job. He was hired at a specialty cupcake bakery and retail store just about a mile from our home. I was very anxious to see him at work but gave him a few days to get settled before stopping in to see him.

When I arrived, he was waiting on a customer, telling them all about the beautiful baked goods in the display case, encouraging them to buy lots of items. *They're really delicious*, I heard him say, all smiles. After he cashed them out he called out, *Hey, Dad, hold on a minute*. He disappeared into the back room before returning with the owner following him, wiping her hands on an apron as she rounded the corner.

*This is my dad*, he told her.

*Oh, Mr. Dolce, so good to meet you*. She wiped her hand again on her apron and extended it to shake mine. *I love having your son here. He's doing such a great job, you should be very proud*.

*Thank you very much. Thank you for giving him this opportunity*, I said, *his first job. I started out in food service. I'm glad he's here. And he's been telling me how great you baked goods are and I certainly have a sweet tooth. And since he hasn't brought any home to his old man, I thought I'd become a customer for a moment and buy some of this great stuff*.

I went back again the next week and bought some more, wanting to encourage Ilya and be a good customer for his boss. I found Ilya again happily helping out customers and then became his customer again, picking up a half dozen cupcakes.

One more week later, on my way home from work, I stopped in again, though he had told me he wasn't working that day. No reason I can't just be a customer, I thought. When I arrived, the owner was waiting on a customer. She glanced in my direction but turned back to her customer. So, I gave her a short wave and started looking into the display cases to wait my turn.

As soon as the other customer left, the owner walked over to me and started talking, not waiting for me to say anything. She looked worried. *I'm so sorry, I hope you understand. He's a great kid, he did great with the customers, but I had no choice*, she said.

*I'm sorry, I'm confused, I'm not sure what you're telling me*, I said

*Oh. He didn't tell you. I'm sorry. I had to fire your son a few days ago*, she said. *He's a great kid*, she repeated, *but I must put safety first, and honesty*. She explained that she had left him in charge of the store while she stepped out to get dinner. When she returned to the store, he was with customers up front and she walked into the back room to return to her baking, slipping on water that had pooled across the whole floor. Ilya had left a sink running, causing it to overflow.

*I could have been seriously hurt, she told me, but Ilya wouldn't take responsibility, insisting that he wasn't the one who left the sink running. I'm telling you, Mr. Dolce, there was nobody else here. It had to be him, which I told him, and then he finally admitted that he knew about it but didn't clean it up or warn me. He said he figured I would clean it up when I got back and he didn't want to do it. I'm sorry, I can't have someone work here who does something like that.*

I assured her that I understood and that I wasn't upset with her, instead that I believed holding him accountable for his choices was an important lesson for him. *He'll learn from this. Thank you again for giving him the opportunity. I'm glad you were ok after the fall. And I'll still be a customer if that's ok. Everything is delicious here.*

When I got home, I told Ilya that I knew what happened and that he needed to be honest with me when something like this happened. *It's really ok to give me bad news, I said, I can only help if I know what's going on. And I'm always on your side.* He said he was surprised that I wasn't angry with him.

His teachers and school administrators told Ilya not to dwell on the loss, only focus on what he could learn from his mistakes so the next job would go better. They assured him that he would have their help in finding a new job, which they did, at a sub shop, where he would make subs and check out customers on the cash register. Ilya learned the menu and all that went into the subs, memorizing every last detail. Mandy and I helped quiz him as he prepared for the manager to test him. He easily passed and started working full time.

The job went well for a couple weeks and Mandy and I stopped in for lunch. He proudly made subs for us. But shortly after that, Ilya got mad at his manager when he was assigned another turn to stand out on the roadway across from the shop holding an advertising poster to wave at the cars passing by the plaza. He didn't enjoy that part of the job. Not liking being sent out there yet again, Ilya told the manager that, *my dad has a gun and I'm going to bring it down here.* I didn't have a gun, but the police were called, a trespass notice issued to him, and that was the end of that job.

Next the school helped Ilya find a job at a nearby Chipotle. Again, he learned the menu quickly and was even able to recite the company's history in great detail. As with the first two jobs, Mandy and I waited a few days before stopping by to see him at work. We met the manager who seemed to really like Ilya, while acknowledging that he would still need to finish the training process and speed up his work pace a bit to keep up with his team. *We work very much as a team here, like an assembly line,* he told us.

Two weeks later, Ilya was told that he didn't meet the speed standards, so his probationary period was the end of his employment there. I thought Ilya would be upset to lose the job, but he actually seemed relieved when we talked about it.

It was a lot of first jobs to lose in such a short time and I was worried he would be discouraged. But I was proud of him, and relieved, when he said that he just hadn't found the right job yet and was ready to try again.

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## His Own Crusade 2013

*Is it just that you want a tattoo,* I asked Ilya one day? He was drawing on himself again with a blue ink pen. Sometimes it looked like he was just drawing random patterns, but often it was vines or tree branches that began on his arm, snaked across his hand and wrapped around his fingers.

*No Dad,* he answered me. *Well, actually, yes, I do want a tattoo, but that's not why I am drawing on myself. I just like to draw. Can I get a tattoo though?*

*Look at this face,* I said, pointing to my face, keeping it as expressionless as I could, fighting back a grin. I did this with him often.

*Right, you don't care,* he said.

*Correct. You can do whatever you want. You're an adult now,* I replied.

*But tattoos cost a lot,* he said.

*Better save up,* I said.

*You're not paying for it then,* he asked?

*Uh, nope.*

I looked closer at his hand. Drops of blood or tears were dripping in between tree branches, I couldn't be sure at first which. Then I saw the word "tears" written across a branch.

By that point in his life, if he wasn't drawing on himself, he was drawing in a sketchbook. He drew frequently, at least weekly if not daily. Most of the drawings were dark, with skulls, thorns, tears. I flipped through his sketchbook one day when he was out of the room and saw a woman's neck and head filling a page. She was looking to her left off the page. Two large swaths of tape covered her mouth, forming an "X". The piece on top had the word "Silence" written on it. The one beneath had the word "Suicide" written on it. On her cheek was a jagged scar and one tear was forming in her eye, ready to run down her face.

Ilya later put that drawing on a Facebook page he created to speak out against bullying and reach out to bullying victims. He was very passionate about what he was doing. He put his phone number on the page and invited anyone who had been bullied to call him to talk about it, in his words, "I just want to let you know that I am here to help if you need someone to talk to. I know how the pain feels. Because I've felt it myself. So please contact me."

He told me about two women who called him to share their stories. He spoke to them for hours, he told me, and felt that he had helped them. He didn't seem happy about it, rather satisfied to have made a difference in their lives. As he told me that, I could see that he was in pain the whole time but was determined to help as many people as he could. He was, I felt, a wounded healer.

He filled the page with messages about how nobody deserved to be bullied, as he had been. He encouraged victims of bullying to stand up for themselves. He posted message after message about how victims should not give up on themselves, should not hurt themselves and should not commit suicide.

Ilya had complained to me for years in school about being picked on for his disabilities and being older than his classmates. They assumed he had failed more than one grade. I suggested that he tell them he just started school later than everyone else because he came from Russia as a child and had to learn English before starting school.

He took my advice, but it backfired. He found himself then being bullied for being a "foster kid" and not having a "real family." He told me this in tears as I assured him he wasn't a foster kid and that we were a real family. I loved him and his whole family loved him, I stressed again and again, but my words never seemed to help.

I felt that Ilya could overcome the bullying. I felt that my love for him and the love of so many other people in our family and community would ensure he eventually felt valued and respected. But more, I felt that he could find his way socially, in time, that the bullying would end, that he would feel welcomed wherever he went. He was to his core a loving, caring person and that, I believed, would make all the difference in the end.

He was not shy either. To be sure, he was awkward around people at times and tried too hard to impress his peers trying to make friends. His teachers continued to complain even in his late teens about him disrupting class by showing off, trying to be the center of attention and make friends. One teacher he had at age fifteen wrote to me that, "I see no real interest in anything other than trying to get a laugh from others or trying to get attention and make friends. I've had to speak to him severely several times in the last few days. He seems not to care at all, but makes silly excuses for himself and makes it clear to me that this is his true behavior."

Three years later, at age eighteen then, it was no better. Another teacher wrote to me then, "The behaviors that I see most usually show that he's trying to impress his peers. He'll say things out loud that his peers won't say because they know they shouldn't, but he's more into it for the laugh. Some of it is inappropriate as far as cursing or sex-related comments (typical teenage boy humor), but majority of the time it's just immature. He still raises his hand and participates, but sometimes he'll even raise his hand to say something that he knows isn't the right thing to say."

His attempts did not work well either. While it endeared him to a few classmates, most found him to be very annoying. His aging peers saw his behavior as too juvenile. Sometimes things got physical, and I got a call from the school.

*Why do you think he hit you, Ilya,* I asked him one evening in our kitchen after one call? I was sitting on the counter, he stood leaning against the other to my side.

*I was just trying to be funny,* he replied.

*But if you were just trying to be funny, why would he want to hit you,* I asked?

*He told me to stop touching him, but I wasn't hitting him. I was just messing around,* he protested.

*How many times did you do it, Ilya?*

*I don't know,* he said, the defensiveness leaving his voice. He looked down at the floor and stared. I let the silence sit as it was, giving him space to think and offer more. *I don't know when to stop,* he said finally.

*Right,* I said, *this has been a problem for you. You have to pay closer attention to how people are reacting to you. Try looking at their faces. If they're not smiling, stop what you're doing. You were having fun, but he wasn't. When you see that, you need to stop. Just look for it.*

After a pause, he said, *He shouldn't have called me a dumb Russian.*

*When did he call you that,* I asked?

*At the end,* he said.

*Well, no he shouldn't have said that, but you pushed him first. He was a bully, but you were both wrong,* I said. *You're not dumb and you should be proud you're from Russian.* I slid off the counter and hugged him.

I knew though that the words hurled at him, no matter his role in provoking them, were cutting deeply into his psyche.

As he wrote on his anti-bullying Facebook page a few years later that bullying victims should not harm themselves, I was reminded that at age sixteen he had disclosed to his therapist Cindy during a session in our living room that he had tried to hurt himself. He had invited me to remain present during his session, though I sat out of view. He described trying to strangle himself with a belt.

He told Cindy then that it had been about a year since he had done anything like that, but I had my doubts that the behavior was in his past only. Just two months earlier than the session with Cindy, I had confronted him about what I feared was him beginning to experiment with self-mutilation. It was the first I had seen of it. I came home from work one day to see cuts on his hands and forearms.

*How did this happen,* I asked him? I couldn't hide my shock. It was in my voice and on my face.

*It's nothing, Dad, I was just carving wood with my pocket knife and it slipped.*

*How many times*, I asked, my voice raising with alarm. *It looks like you just let it all bleed, many times, not just once*, I said, taking hold of his wrist and lifting his arm to see closer. The blood had dried in place. There was no sign he tried to stop the bleeding or to clean it up. I saw about ten cuts of different sizes and depths.

*We have band-aids. What gives*, I asked?

He pulled his arm back. *I'll go clean up*, he said, defiance in his voice, disappearing up the stairs into the bathroom.

The next morning when he was in the shower, I went into his room, found his pocketknife, and put it in my briefcase to take to my office. I threw it away, feeling a bit ridiculous though doing that. There were still plenty of sharp knives in the kitchen and he could always find his way to something sharp if he wanted to do so.

When I told Cindy about Ilya's cuts, I told her that I believed Ilya probably hurt himself on purpose. I reminded her that I had been in child abuse treatment groups myself as an adult with many self-destructive people, many of them cutters. I had seen the patterns of scars on so many and heard them explain why they cut, *to see the pain flow out*, as one woman told me.

As a young child, in fourth grade, about three years after I was raped. I was caught once, hiding beneath a desk in my classroom with a shard of broken glass, digging it into my arm to make it bleed, the same part of my arm that was cut and bleeding when I wrecked my bike and ended up in a child rapist's house. I dug it into my arm until my teacher pulled the chair out and ducked down to ask me what I was doing. I hid the glass and pulled the bandage back over the wound. The day before, I had cut it the same way.

*I was just checking on my cut*, I told my teacher.

*Do you want me to look at it for you*, she asked as I pulled myself to standing?

*No, thank you*, I said.

*How about the nurse, do you want to go to the nurse*, she asked?

*No, thank you*, I replied, *I'll be ok*.

So, I knew what I was seeing in my son. I just didn't know what to do about it that I wasn't already doing. Besides, I had made it, so would he I believed.



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Yeah, Buddy  
December 2013

In the fall of 2013, Ilya's teachers were increasingly frustrated with him. He was saying more than ever that he wanted to get a new job but was not cooperating with the job coaches to get one. He busied himself in class finding ways to express his upset by trying to take over classes and act like he was the teacher.

At school and at home, as well as church, his social interactions became less mature, more demanding and at times rude. He was regressing. At home, he seemed depressed, not having the motivation some days even to shower, so much so that I called Dr. K about maybe changing his medication. But he prescribed no changes. *I think it's a behavioral problem at this time*, he responded.

Mandy and I started talking about what would be best for Ilya after we got married in December. We were going to live in Mandy's house but became concerned that if Ilya moved in too, he would be less motivated than ever to take control of his own life, do what was necessary to succeed for himself. It felt to us that he wanted to be cared for like a child and couldn't break himself out of that tendency. So, we decided that he should not move in with us, that it was time to take steps towards helping Ilya live independently.

I got Ilya a disability advocate to help connect him to public and community resources, including vocational support and housing support services. Ilya did not cooperate well. He did not keep many of his appointments with her or agencies she scheduled him to meet with. Other times, he needed to make choices about what he wanted but failed to do so. *I can only help him if he joins in the process*, she told me, *he has to become invested in what we are doing. I can't do it for him. I can only help him if he'll accept the help. But I will keep calling him*, she said.

Then one day late in the fall, Ilya suddenly changed. It was like he woke up from a long sleep. I called the school when he didn't show up at home on time. The school's director returned my call to tell me that she had been meeting with Ilya in her office that afternoon, trying to encourage him to work better with the job coaches to get the job he needed to get and keep in order to graduate.

*He stood up and told me he was going to get his own job and that he was going to get one today no matter what. Then he walked out of my office and out the front door*, she told me, *so, I don't know where he is, but let me know when he shows up please. I'll worry all night otherwise.*

By then Ilya was taking public busses to get around and there were any number of places he could have gone. He wasn't answering his phone and there was nobody else to call to see where he was. So, I waited anxiously, looking out the front window countless times for him. Finally, well after nightfall, I heard him at the door. He bounded in with a huge smile on his face. I didn't even have to ask where he had been. He started speaking rapidly.

*I got a job, he exclaimed! I'm a busboy at Hamburger Heaven downtown. I got it all by myself!*

*Congratulations! How'd you do this, I asked?*

He was still speaking very quickly as he told me how he took the bus from school to downtown and started going to every business he saw to ask if they were hiring. *I gave them my resume and filled out applications. Then I got to Hamburger Heaven and the manager was there, looked at my resume and said she would interview me. We talked, then she hired me on the spot! I've already been through orientation. I just need to get black pants and non-slip shoes. Can we get those tomorrow? I need them right away. I have to be back at work tomorrow night.*

Hamburger Heaven was a very popular local restaurant, a fixture in the community for decades since it opened just after World War II.

*Of course, I said, we'll get your shoes and pants. That's a great restaurant. I'll take a break from work in the afternoon, and we'll go get them. No problem. I'm real proud of you.*

I called the school director at home to let her know he was ok. *He'll have some good news for you in the morning, I told her.*

Ilya was very happy in the coming weeks leading up to the wedding as he settled into his job and looked forward to taking over our townhouse when I moved to Mandy's house. The plan was for him to stay there until it was sold and then get an apartment through an independent living program that his disability advocate helped me locate. Until he got to the independent living program, a social worker would visit him each evening to check on how he was doing and make sure he was taking proper care of himself.

On the wedding day, Ilya charmed everyone around him, updating family and friends with news of the job he got by himself and loved, how happy he was to be getting his own place to live.

At the reception, he stood before some one hundred guests, full of confidence, and raised his glass to offer the best man's toast to me and his Mama Mandy. Seconds after he was done with the toast, he said, *Oh, wait – one more thing – yeah buddy!* It was his favorite expression at the time, one he shared most often with Mandy. I was overwhelmed with pride and love for the confident young man I had raised.

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On His Own  
Spring 2014

A couple weeks into Ilya living by himself in our townhouse, the social worker I hired to check on him each day contacted me to say that Ilya called her and canceled her visit that day.

*He said he has to go to work early, she told me.*

*Ok, fine, I said, that makes sense.*

The next day, I got the same call and then, again, the day after that. *He's not working with me to set a time for me to come over when he's home. He must be home sometimes, she said.*

I called Ilya and asked him to work with her on the schedule. *I'm not going to, he told me. I'm twenty years old, I'm a grown man, I don't need her. I don't need a babysitter.*

Knowing that he could easily continue to thwart the social worker's efforts, and seemed determined to do just that, I told him that we would cancel her for now and see how he did.

After that, I kept closer tabs on him. Hamburger Heaven was near my office, just about four blocks away. I stopped by to see him, picking up a burger to go or a milkshake as my excuse for being there.

Other days, I would simply show up at the house. As the weeks wore on, Ilya appeared more and more unkept. He frequently looked like he hadn't showered, and his work uniforms were often not clean, or missing a belt, or he was wearing the wrong shoes. His hair was getting longer. I offered several times to take him to get it cut. *I'll take care of it, Dad,* was his constant response, even when I offered to pay for it.

At the house one day standing in the kitchen, I warned him that he could lose his job if he didn't take better care of himself.

*They're not going to fire me. I do a great job. They love me, he said.*

*They can love you and still fire you. It's a restaurant. You have to look good. You can't show up with dirty clothes or messy hair.*

*I'm the busboy, he retorted, I'm going to get stuff spilled on my clothes anyway.*

I pushed back. *Well, you want to be promoted to waiter – you told me that. That's not going to happen if you don't keep yourself clean and get a haircut. You have to prove to them you are ready to stand in front of customers and represent the restaurant,* I said.

*I am ready, I'll get the next opening, he told me.*

I started to worry that what I was seeing were signs of drug use. He had tried marijuana the year before with a friend he made, Dillon, who I met twice and I believed was probably a dealer. I didn't think Dillon was a real friend. Dillon would just use Ilya for whatever he could, I believed.

So, I asked him how Dillon was doing, to see if he was in touch with him.

*He's fine, he answered. I helped him out the other day. He'll pay me back.*

*He borrowed money? What did he need money for, I asked?*

*His mom was short on rent money.*

*You shouldn't have done that. I think he lied to you.*

*No, Dad, he's my friend.*

*How much did he borrow, I asked?*

*Just four hundred dollars.*

*That's like half your savings, I said, that was a mistake.*

*How do you know how much money I have, he demanded?*

*You told everyone that you had about a thousand dollars in the bank. You're not going to see that money again. He's a drug dealer, isn't he?*

*No, he's not.*

*Where's he working then, I asked?*

*I don't know. The mall, I think.*

*I thought he was your friend. Some friend. You don't even know where he works, I said. He's too slick. I think he's a dealer. Has he given you drugs?*

*No, Dad.*

I then pulled out Ilya's medication bottles out of the cupboard where we had kept them for years and dumped them onto a plate.

*What are you doing, Ilya asked as I counted out the pills?*

*I'm finding out that you haven't been taking your meds, for about two weeks, it looks like,* I said, glancing at the fill date on the prescription label.

*I don't need them,* Ilya said. *I don't want to take pills for the rest of my life. I'm fine.*

*You need them. Dr. K wouldn't prescribe them if you didn't need them.*

*I said I don't need them,* he insisted, *I feel fine.*

*Look, Ilya, there's no shame in this. It takes twenty seconds at most to take you pills. Not a burden. It's easy and they help you. What if I didn't take my asthma medication? The asthma doesn't go away just because I don't like it. Really, the meds help you.*

*I've had enough of them. I'm fine,* he said.

*You're fine but you have medical conditions. That's what medicine is for,* I replied.

*Dr. K said it's up to me if I take them,* he insisted.

*Because you're an adult, he legally has to tell you that it is your choice. But Dr. K never said you don't need them. Again, he wouldn't write the script if you didn't need them. It's nothing to be ashamed of. People take pills for all kinds of things. It really is ok.*

*I'll think about it,* he replied.

Two weeks later, I stopped by Hamburger Heaven. He wasn't there. I asked the hostess if he was working that day. *No, he's not on the schedule,* she told me.

I went back to my office and called the house. He answered, sounding groggy. *You're sick,* I asked?

*I'll be fine. Just didn't feel up to working today,* he said, *I'm just watching TV. Chillin'*

*Ok, dude, feel better,* I said.

I hung up and immediately left the office and drove to the house. As I rounded the last corner, I could see a car in my reserved parking space. And I saw Dillon and two other men on the patio.

I pulled into a visitor space. Dillon saw me get out and suddenly pulled open the sliding glass door and darted into the house.

*You fucking drug dealer,* I screamed, *get the fuck away from my son!*

I ran to the front door, reaching it as Dillon and the two men pushed it open, nearly knocking me over as they ran out.

I chased Dillon to his car in my parking space.

*You mother fucking dealer! Stay the fuck away from my kid! I'll fucking kill you,* I screamed, as he took off.

I returned to the house.

*Why'd you do that to my friends,* Ilya demanded?

*They're no friends. Where are the drugs,* I yelled back?

I didn't wait for an answer. I went to the patio and found them in plastic bags, stuffed into the dirt in a planter.

*See,* I yelled at Ilya, holding up the drugs, *I told you he's a damn dealer. You lied to me. And he's storing his drugs in my house? You let that happen? Where's the rest of it,* I demanded?

*That's it,* he answered.

*I don't believe you,* I said, and went up to his bedroom, where I found drug pipes.

I flushed the drugs and smashed the pipes. Then I sat Ilya down in the living room.

*I'm going to make this simple,* I said. *I'm a lawyer. I can't have my house turned into a drug den. And I'm your father. I will not sit by while you become a drug addict and trash your life.*

He started to speak. *I'm not -*

I cut him off. *Don't lie. Don't bother. I know Dillon's got you on drugs and if I ever see him again, I will beat him to death with my bare hands. You have one week. You will move out in one week. Call your disability advocate. Get into the independent living program. You need help. You will get that help. It's that simple. One week and I change the locks. I will call her and tell her to expect your call.*

I found out the next week that Ilya did not call in sick to work. He was suspended from work for the condition he was in when he arrived. He lost his job the next week and moved the week after that into the independent living program.

He was angry with me the entire time until he actually arrived at the independent living program, especially when I went to check on him at the townhouse. When I showed up on a Saturday for the last time before he moved out, he told me that I should leave, that he didn't need someone checking up on him. He told me that I had no right to tell him what to do, that I didn't understand him, saying that he had lost two parents and I had only lost one.

The next day, though, he showed up in my Sunday school class, plunked himself down to have snacks and said he could help with the class. He said nothing about all of the recent conflicts or

what he had said. Instead, he just acted like his usual self. I didn't feel the need to bring any of it up. I was relieved to be with him without any confrontation going on. I invited him to lunch, but he said that he had already arranged to have lunch after the service with two of our friends at church, men who had been mentors to him for years. He called them his "uncles." I was glad to hear that he would be spending time with them. They had always been good to him and given him guidance many times. Turning to people in our church community for help and companionship was something that I tried to teach him. As much as ever, I felt he needed that kind of support in his life.



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## Struggling and Growing Summer 2014

Shortly after Ilya entered the independent living program, he was assigned a “life coach” to support him daily. Eric was a former Marine, a father himself, and was to play a central role in Ilya’s daily life. Ilya would be accountable to him during a daily visit for all the basics, how well he cared for himself, how he ate, how he dressed and how he was getting along with his roommates. Eric would help Ilya find work and work with him to keep the job, staying in touch with the employer regularly to address any problems that might develop.

Ilya was excited to be in the program, feeling independent in his first apartment and having roommates who felt like built in friends to share it with. Mandy and I went to visit and he proudly showed us how he decorated his room and set up his closet. He loved having his own place.

Despite the structure of the program, I suspected that Ilya was still finding a way to access drugs and then he confirmed it to me when I asked him about a job interview that I heard was coming up at Dunkin Donuts.

*I can’t get the job, Ilya told me. They drug test and I used drugs two weeks ago.* He refused though to tell me what the drugs were, where he got them, or how he got money to pay for them.

Then, halfway through the summer, I got a call near midnight from a staff member at the independent living program telling me that Ilya was sick. She told me that he had been vomiting since the day before. Almost twenty-four hours had gone by and she was worried he might need to go to the hospital.

*Does he have a fever or any other symptoms,* I asked?

*No, it’s not that,* she said, *he says he drank a lot of vodka.*

*This could be serious. I’ll come get him,* I said. We lived only a few miles away and it wasn’t far from there to the hospital.

As I raced Ilya to the hospital, he told me that it was true, that he drank almost an entire bottle of vodka by himself. A new friend bought it for him, but his friend only drank beer. Ilya had the vodka bottle to himself.

*Roll the window down, then,* I told him. *Vomit out the window if you have to, just not in my car.*

*Nice, Dad,* he said.

*What possessed you to drink that much vodka all at once,* I asked?

*I'm Russian, Dad, he said, we drink vodka. I can handle it.*

*Apparently not, I replied.*

*Nice, Dad, he said again.*

*The doctor will need to know what else you took with the vodka. The drugs. You can't lie. They need the truth. They won't arrest you. Tell the truth so they know how to treat you, I told him. So, let's practice, what else did you take, I asked?*

*Nothing, Dad, he said, just the vodka.*

*And some pot, I asked?*

*And some pot, he said.*

When we got to the emergency room, I told the nurse my son drank a whole bottle of vodka all at once.

*Oh no, she said spontaneously, then he needs to go straight back.* She directed him through the triage door.

When I was done checking him in, I was told to stay in the waiting room, that he was being treated and I would be called back once he was stabilized. About an hour later, I was told it was ok to see him.

When I got to the room, he was all hooked up to monitors and had an IV in his arm. His doctor came in a few minutes later and asked him if she could talk about his medical condition with me present. *I have to ask because you're an adult, she explained.* He agreed.

She told us that he was lucky to be alive. *That much alcohol so fast can easily kill someone, she said. If you weren't as young and strong as you are, she said to him, you probably would have died. That's not an invitation to do this again. Next time, you just might die. So, let's make sure there's no next time, got it?*

*I got it, I'm not doing this again, I feel like shit, he said, nodding his head.*

*Mind your language, I told him, there's a lady present.*

*Thanks, but I've heard worse, the doctor said to me. We're going to keep your son for a while. I want to get more fluids in him and monitor him for a few hours. He needs some rest. Go get some breakfast, then come back for him in a few hours.*

As she left, she said to him, *And by the way, mixing it with drugs doesn't help either. If you've got a problem, get some help.*

After he was released and back at the apartment, the director of the independent living program came to him and told him he would need to be moved to a different apartment, where the residents were monitored by staff twenty-four hours a day. He would not be allowed out without a staff escort, he was told. He would also have his cell phone taken away, for a while, to limit who he could contact who might give him drugs or alcohol. She said she would keep the restrictions in place until she believed he was ready to be trusted again.

She called me to tell me that Ilya didn't like any of the restrictions she outlined when she met with him.

*He told me that I couldn't do this to him, that he's an adult and wouldn't agree. He said he's not in jail, she relayed to me. So, I told him that this is my program, so I get to set the rules. If you don't like them, I don't force you, but you will have to leave the program, she said.*

*That all makes sense to me, I replied.*

*Michael, she said, Ilya was defiant. He said he'd rather sleep in the woods. He grabbed some stuff from his room and walked out the door. I thought you should know, but I think he'll be back when he cools off, unless he comes to your house. So, let me know if he shows up, ok?*

I agreed with her that he would probably just come back to the program at nightfall. Since he didn't show up at our house, and I got no more calls, I assumed he did just that. The next morning, though, the director called me to say that he stayed out all night before returning after sunrise to say he would accept the restrictions. He didn't like sleeping in the woods, he told her.

Ilya stabilized in the coming weeks, not only getting a job he liked but showing no signs of using drugs even when the restrictions on him were lifted. We were especially grateful because he was about to become a big brother again. Mandy and I were expecting a baby boy. We wanted Ilya to be well to enjoy the experience of our family growing and to be able to embrace his little brother.

On September 16, Ilya was among the first to welcome Luke to our family. He couldn't wait to hold him, smiling broadly when he walked into the hospital room. He sat down in a chair and accepted the baby into his arms, cradling him close to his chest, talking directly to him. The look in his eyes told me that he loved his brother in an instant.

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## Perseverance May 2015

Early in 2015, we were anticipating that Ilya would finally graduate from high school in the spring. His graduation requirement checklist had very few items left on it. The main one was simply to keep the job Eric helped him get at Lion Country Safari, a six hundred acre, drive-through safari park, located just a few miles from where I had raised Ilya. The park was almost fifty years old, popular with both locals and tourists alike. I had taken Ilya and Sarah through several times as they were growing up. Many of the hundreds of animals roam free and will walk up to cars, like the ostrich who strode up to our car and tried to eat the side mirror.

After driving through the safari, visitors could get out of their cars and go to a walk-through amusement park, petting zoo, gift shop and cafeteria. Ilya was working in the cafeteria. He had been doing various jobs there, though mainly working the cash register. During a visit myself, his supervisor told me that he really seemed to enjoy working at the cash register the most because he could talk to all the visitors.

*The customers love how friendly he is. And, she added, he is getting along well with his co-workers. He's easy to love, she told me with a smile.*

On Ilya's graduation day, we threw a big luncheon party for him in the conference room at my law office. We filled the room with decorations and welcomed friends and family, even some strangers from the building who were just happy to join in our celebration. Mandy prepared trays full of Ilya's favorite foods for lunch, with lots of baked goods for dessert. Ilya scooped up his baby brother into his arms and carried him around the room, showing him off to everyone.

I prepared a speech for him, to congratulate him and let him know how proud I was of his perseverance and the man he had become. I wanted everyone present to know how far Ilya had come, so I spoke of the beautiful child I had met in Russia, how he had to learn a new language and new way of life, how he had grown up strong and loving, how he always ready to extend a helping hand to others and serve his community, whether through donating blood or building Habitat for Humanity houses or helping teach children at our church. All the things he was that were simply his beautiful self, things that couldn't be taught from a book or tested on paper. I concluded by honoring his homeland and my love for him. "Ya tebya lyublyu, moy syn. I love you, my son."

Then Ilya came to the podium. He spoke from his heart, without any prepared notes. He spoke of how grateful he was for everyone who had helped him along the way and how happy he was to have made it to this day. He spoke of his love for all, for his family, naming everyone individually, his sister, his new brother, me and his Mama Mandy.

As everyone was leaving the celebration, my good friend and mentor, Gary, patted me on the shoulder and said, *Great job, dad, congratulations. I think you both just graduated. You won't find a prouder dad today than you, that's for sure.*

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## On Being Adopted December 2016

Ilya turned twenty-three in August 2016. On December 16, 2016, just after four o'clock in the morning, Ilya wrote to the world on his anti-bullying Facebook page his feelings about being adopted, about being bullied and about his belief in God. In his words, unedited:

What life is like being adopted. It definitely feels different, in both ways, good and bad. What I mean by this is bad as in I will always wonder who my birth parents are, what they do, how they act, how they feel, and how they would think of me, I will never know unless I really push to find them honestly I am scared of the outcome that I would get.

Because they could be happy to see me or they could just push me away, and what ever happened, happened .... because I have to learn to accept it for what it is. I know for a fact that I will you cry for help in this or just burst in tears for years of letdown, but it's actually not it went down because god gave me a second chance, to live. But I will let you know it still hurts to this day. Because I am always asking myself why? What happened, how did this come too.

But I know I am with the very loving family just loves me with all their heart and all three words cannot express how much my love ones do for me.

What I remember from The orphanage is when I helped other kids in the orphanage. Also eating ice cream in the hallway. Also flying like an airplane in my dad's hands. And swing on the swings with the boy named Pasha the swing was a baby blue and the baby green color.

Then coming to America I had to change everything I had to learn a new language meet new people try new things and I remember growing up as a baby boy it was tough being made fun of almost every day saying that your parents didn't love you and that hurt me the most.

I've had to learn a lot from other people but in doing so what God did for me and gave to me was a blessing he gave me the ability to have a great loving life and being able to help others to make a difference for his people.

my believe that this is one of the God-given gifts. That I have been given honestly if you really think about it I've been given a second chance in life and not a lot of people get that and I'm very grateful for it.

I've figured out that I just need to find out who I want to be in life. So my plan is to travel. To where ever the road takes me. I'm tired of people stabbing me in the back, tired of the pain that I deal with. That's why I try to keep a positive attitude tours life.

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Ticket to Success  
September 2017

After his graduation, Ilya tried to settle into life with the continued help of his independent living program. He continued to confide in Mandy regularly or simply reach out to enjoy his relationship with her. But he also continued to struggle with marijuana use, more often than not denying it was a problem for him, even when he was suspended from one job for failing a drug test and getting fired from the next for not making it to work on time because he had been using.

He insisted to me that it was better for him to use marijuana than take his medications, as if it was an appropriate substitute, which it was not. But he didn't like how the medications made him feel, he said, and they were all just "chemicals" anyway, while marijuana was "natural" and "just a plant."

I tried to reason with him. *I know marijuana is a plant and that seems natural to you, but there's nothing unnatural about your medications. You've always done better when you take them and they can be adjusted or switched by Dr. K if there is something about them that doesn't make you feel good*, I said. *Marijuana is like alcohol in a way, some people can use it for recreation once or twice a month and it doesn't harm their lives, but other people can't stop at once or twice. It harms their lives, like marijuana has caused you to lose a job and get suspended from another.*

No matter what I said though, and no matter the consequences in his life, he would not accept that he should avoid it and return to his medications. I only pushed so hard and so often though because when I did, he would accuse me of trying to control him and get upset with me. I reassured myself that it was marijuana, not cocaine or heroin. It wouldn't kill him. And on the whole, he was doing well in several ways. He was making and keeping friends. He was connected to his family. He was employed, more often than not. Most of all, he was still the beautiful young man with a heart of gold who would give his last dollar to help a stranger.

Shortly after his twenty-fourth birthday, though, a stranger entered his life, and I was convinced the stranger meant him harm. Ilya called us to announce that he was moving to Missouri where a friend, Jachin, was waiting to welcome him. But he had never mentioned Jachin to me or Mandy, or having friends in any other state for that matter.

Jachin was going to give him a job, make him part of his company which was on the brink of major success, he said. He had invented a revolutionary device, he told Ilya, to test blood sugar in diabetics without having to use a needle. No more uncomfortable pin pricks. The device could be worn like a watch and test blood sugar through the skin. He expected to make millions, he told Ilya, and wanted Ilya to live with him and be his "main assistant." He would make Ilya rich. He was even going to send Ilya a bus ticket to get to Missouri.

A few days later, I sat down with Ilya to confront him about Jachin.



*He was one of the founders of Apple, Dad, Ilya told me, he already has a bunch of money. Now, he just wants to help other people get rich too.*

*Ilya, he's lying to you, Apple was founded by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, in Jobs' garage in California, not Missouri, I said.*

*Well, one of those computer companies, Ilya replied, Jachin's not a liar.*

*Think about this, Ilya, if he's so rich, why isn't he getting you an airplane ticket? What's with the cheap bus ticket, I asked?*

*That's just because I have to pay him back for the ticket once I start making money and he doesn't want me to have to owe him too much, he replied. No handouts, he added, I'm going to pay him rent and pay for my own groceries.*

*That's ridiculous, Ilya, but let me tell you something else then. I researched the idea of testing blood sugar through skin. The idea has been brought up, but by a different company and they said recently it would take several more years before their device could get government approval and be available for sale. There's no way this guy is ahead of that.*

*Ilya shook his head back and forth, You're just wrong, Dad. Jachin's going to help me become a big success.*

*Ilya wouldn't give me much more information about Jachin. He figured out quickly why I was asking for details. He told me that I didn't need to research him any more. I trust him, Dad, he's been my friend for a few years.*

*How did you become friends, Facebook, I asked?*

*No, he raises parrots also. He came to Lion Country Safari to see our parrots, I met him there, he told me.*

*I asked for an address where Ilya was going to be living with Jachin, saying it only made sense that I know where he would be living.*

*I don't even know it, Ilya told me, Jachin doesn't give out his address. He has a P.O box address he gives out. He's very private. He needs to be because of his money.*

*Mandy managed to get Jachin's phone number from Ilya, which we then researched to match a last name to him. We found very little else about him, unable to find any residential addresses tied to him. We suspected his name was not his legal name or he might have aliases. As it was, Ilya had told me he changed his name several years earlier, so the current name would only trail back so many years anyway. Without having his former name, the trail went cold.*

*But what little we did find was very disturbing. We found his name tied to a fraudulent business in Atlanta that had been investigated by the police. Mandy also found several photos of him on*

social media, all with his arm around young men who appeared to be developmentally disabled. We also found that it appeared he had adopted one of them, an uncommon adult adoption.

I sat Ilya down to tell him what we had found. He didn't seem to care about the fraudulent business and said he knew about the adoption. He told me a long story about how Jachin had adopted the man to help him when he had nowhere else to turn. *Jachin just likes to help people, Dad, why can't you accept that*, he asked me?

*He's a fraud, Ilya.*

*I'm going and he's going to help me and you can't stop me*, Ilya responded.

*I know I can't stop you, but I'm your Dad, I have to warn you. Just promise me that if you go, you will call me the minute anything goes wrong. I will get you back home with no questions asked.*

*Sure, but nothing will go wrong, you'll see*, he answered.

Mandy spoke to Ilya after that, just the two of them. He told Mandy how great Jachin was, how concerned he was about Ilya and his future. He told Ilya that he was like family to him and would even adopt him if he wanted him to. But just as with me, no matter what concerns Mandy raised with him, Ilya wouldn't be dissuaded. He was going to Missouri to become a big success with his friend and that was that.

Ilya announced a few days later that the bus ticket had arrived. I did a few things to get ready for his departure but didn't tell him what those steps were. I asked for the bus route, the cities he would be driving through, acting as if I was excited to know all the places he would see on his way to Missouri. He was very ready to share all of that with me. I asked too when he was leaving West Palm Beach. He gave me the date and time. With all that information, I was able to research and figure out the bus numbers and bus companies he would be traveling on.

Next, I went to a phone store for his carrier, gave them his phone number, and told them I wanted to pay the bill for my son. *You can pay my bill too, if you want*, the clerk joked with me. I paid the current balance and a month ahead.

Keeping his phone on was critical to making sure Ilya could call me. He would be alarmed if Jachin tried to take his phone, but I was convinced that Jachin was going to soon take all of Ilya's money for "rent" and "groceries," leaving nothing for the phone bill and it would be cut off.

Next, I called my favorite private detective, who goes by "Cobra," based in Fort Lauderdale. I told him what was going on. *I need one of you in Missouri, Cobra. Can you get me the best in Missouri, the fucking best, nothing less?*

*No problem, brother man*, he replied, *we'll get the asshole. Let me make a few calls. I'll hit you back.*

Within an hour Cobra had the name and number I needed. I called and gave him the bus numbers and arrival time. I emailed him Ilya's picture.

*Be there when the bus arrives, I said, keep your distance. I want photos of whoever meets my son, get me a good photo of the guy. I want photos of any vehicle they get into. Get me the tag and follow the mother fucker. I want to know everywhere they stop. Everywhere. If he stops to piss, I want to know where he pissed. If they make contact with anyone else, I want pictures. And I have to know where he lives, the address, pictures, everything. And if he lays a hand on my kid, you see anything go wrong, get the cops.*

*This much surveillance is going to be expensive, he said.*

*This is my kid. You have a blank check, I replied.*

*Understood, I'm on it, I'll be at the bus station and give you updates through the day, he said.*

We had dinner with Ilya the night before he was to leave. I didn't say another word about my concerns about Jachin. I wanted Ilya to feel fully supported so he would call often and tell me what was going on, good or bad. After dinner, I hugged my son and wished him well on the adventure he was set to embark on early the next morning. I told him I was proud of him setting out to find his way in the world.

The next day, Ilya called from the bus as soon as it crossed the state line into Georgia. He was out of Florida and very excited to be in another state, for the first time on his own. He told me all about the bus and how great it was to see what he was seeing on the road and at the stops. I acted excited, though I was really only excited about the investigator I had waiting in Missouri to rip off Jachin's mask.

Ilya called a few more times through the day. Late in the day he called to say the bus broke down in Tennessee and they had to wait for a replacement. They would be delayed about two hours.

I called the investigator and updated him. *No problem, he said, buses are often late. I'll keep track of the schedules but let me know anything you hear.*

Three hours later, Ilya called again. They were still waiting and had been told it might be another hour. He was anxious to get going.

I waited an hour and called him back. He was just boarding the replacement bus and glad to keep going. *Great, I said, keep me up to date. They would be driving through the night.*

The next morning, Ilya called me. He was in Illinois, at a bus station. With the delay from the bus breaking down though, he had missed his connection to Missouri.

*When's the next bus, I asked?*

*Not 'till tomorrow, I already got the ticket,* he said. He gave me the bus number when I asked for it.

*You going to hang out at the bus station? What's everyone else doing?*

*I guess I'll hang out here, don't really have a choice,* he replied. *Doesn't bother me, though, I'll just talk to people,* he said.

*Ok, well, just check with me every couple hours so I know you're ok,* I said.

*Dude, I'll be fine,* he replied.

I called the investigator and told him about the delay and gave him the new bus number. Once again, he said it was not a problem.

My phone rang again an hour later.

It was Ilya. *Great news, Dad,* he exclaimed, without even saying "hello."

*They got you an earlier bus,* I asked?

*No. Better than that. Jachin's going to come pick me up. He's driving here now so I don't have to sleep in the bus station.*

I had to hide the alarm in my voice. *Oh, that's great,* I said, *listen, I have to go to the bathroom, let me call you back in a bit.*

I immediately called the investigator and told him what was happening. *Can you get to Effingham, Illinois,* I asked? *Jachin might already be on the way, can you leave now?*

*That's about a five hour drive,* he said, *I'll sure try, but hopefully he doesn't have too much of a head start on me.*

I called Ilya back and asked when Jachin would be there.

*Not sure,* he said, *he's gonna call me when he's close, but it's like a four hour drive or something.*

*Ok, great, he's picking you up right at the bus station, right?*

*Yes, he told me to stay here, but I'm gonna walk over to Dunkin' Donuts. Just across the street. Then I'll come back to the station.*

*Sounds like a plan. Can you call me after Jachin calls to say he's close?*

*Sure, no problem,* he said.

About four hours later, Ilya called me back.

When I answered, I asked, *So, is Jachin almost there?*

*Yep. He's almost here! He's less than a mile away.*

*Hey, that's great, I said, Um ... I have to go to the bathroom. Can I call you right back?*

*What's wrong with you, dude, you keep going to the bathroom,* he asked, while laughing?

I called the investigator right away. *How close are you?*

*Half hour at least,* he said, *maybe a bit more.*

I got off the phone. I had no idea what to do. My thoughts were racing. Jachin had my son. I never should have let Ilya go. My son was with a very dangerous man. *How the fuck did you let this happen,* I asked myself? I felt dizzy and was sick to my stomach.

I folded my hands in prayer. *He's in your hands now, God. Please keep my boy safe. I'm begging you. Keep my boy safe.*

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Uncontrollable  
September 2017

Ilya called me after he got settled into Jachin's apartment. He sounded very excited to be there. He told me everything was fine and he was very glad to be there. He told me how great Jachin was and how they would soon be working on his success. They were going out to eat. He would call me later.

*Wait, I said, is that Jachin I hear in the background? Put him on the phone. Let me thank him for driving so far to pick you up.*

Jachin got on the phone, as pleasant as he could be. I thanked him for picking up Ilya.

*Listen, I said, you have my son. I'm a bit surprised you had him move out there without talking to me first, right?*

His tone of voice became slightly less pleasant.

*He's an adult, it was his idea to come here, he replied, he's a great guy. He's really smart. He's going to do well here.*

*He sure is and he's my son. I'm sure you are aware that he has some medical issues. You're going to make sure that he's ok, right? You have my number I assume. You'll call me if anything goes wrong.*

*Yes, of course, no problem. Good talking to you, he said, and handed the phone back to Ilya.*

*Ok, Dad, gotta bolt. I'll talk to you later, Ilya said.*

*Call me if you need anything. Love you, I said.*

*Love you, too, he replied.*

Each day after that I tried to call Ilya. Most times, he didn't answer. When he did, he sounded happy and excited with all that Jachin was showing him around town. Then I asked about the invention and the company. *You getting to work on it yet, I asked?*

*Soon, but not yet. Jachin's helping me get a job in the meantime though. He has a friend who's a manager at a store. I'm going for an interview tomorrow.*

*What about the company? I thought you were going to be his main assistant or something, I said.*

*Yes, that will happen, he replied. But not yet. Jachin said in the meantime I need to make money to help pay for my expenses, my food and stuff. But he's going to get me a new phone.*

*A new phone? Why? Yours is pretty new.*

*He's going to pay for it from the company, he said. I won't need mine anymore.*

*Ilya, keep your phone for a while. Promise me you'll keep your phone for a while. I paid the bill, I told him, you're good for more than a month.*

*Well, he's not buying it today. But soon. I'll let you know the new number.*

*Ilya, be careful, I said, don't let someone else control your phone. You just got there. Make sure things are working out before you change anything.*

*Everything's great, Dad, he tried to assure me.*

The next day, he called me back, very excited to tell me that he got the job with Jachin's help. And each day after that, for about a week, he called with the latest exciting news about his new job and how well they said he was doing.

The next call was different. Ilya asked me to send his birth certificate, the original, not a copy.

*What for, I asked?*

*Jachin needs it, he answered, he's going to apply for some disability benefits for me. He says I can get money for my disabilities. Oh, he also needs my adoption papers. Can you send those too?*

*Sure, I said, give me the address. I'll send them.*

He gave me a post office box address.

*No, I said, I need the address for the apartment. I don't want to send original documents to a P.O. Box. Don't want them put in the wrong box, you know. There's hundreds of those boxes at the post office, all lined up right next to each other. Let's be safe, just give me the street address and I'll send the docs.*

*I'm not allowed to give the address out, he replied.*

*It's just me, dude, I'm not going to stick it on the Internet or something.*

*No, I can't. Jachin specifically said to have the papers sent to the P.O. Box.*

*Well, then, ok, but I'll send it certified, with a signature required, I said.*



I got off the phone. I had no intention of sending the documents.

A few days later, Ilya called again. For the first time since he got to Missouri, he sounded upset.

*What's wrong, Ilya, I asked?*

*Jachin has all these dumb rules, he said.*

*Where are you, I asked?*

*At the apartment. But Jachin's not here right now.*

*What are the dumb rules, I asked?*

Ilya explained that Jachin had very strict rules about the kitchen. Certain things Ilya was not supposed to touch, and he had to wash his hands whenever he went in or out of the kitchen. And there were other rules about what he could and could not do, like not going outside without letting Jachin know and not going outside when it got late at night.

*He told me it's his house so he gets to set the rules, Ilya said, but I'm like, I live here too now. Why can't I do what I want? I'm an adult. And I'm going to be paying for groceries and rent. I just need to get my first paycheck.*

*Do you want to leave, Ilya, I asked? I can help you any time, I added.*

*No, I'm going to stay. I'm going to succeed and I like my new job, he said.*

*Well, let me know anytime you need help. No questions asked. Just let me know, ok?*

*Ok, Dad, he said, and did you send those papers? Jachin keeps asking.*

*Um, tell him I gave them to my secretary to mail. I'll check with her to make sure they went out.*

*Ok, thanks. Love you. Talk to you tomorrow, he said.*

It took just a few more days and Jachin called me. He was angry.

*Can you talk to Ilya, he asked me? He needs to understand that I'm doing a lot for him here but he's under my roof. There's some rules he needs to follow. We were out tonight at a show. I paid for the tickets. We ran into some of my friends and Ilya was really rude to them. It was very embarrassing.*

*I see, I said, I'm surprised you're asking me this. But you said something about rules. What rules?*

*This is a small town, he started to explain, you can't just go wandering around at night at all hours. The police will think you're looking for drugs. I told Ilya not to go out after nine, but off he goes*

*without telling me. I know he's had a drug problem. I can't have the police picking him up. So my rule is, stay in by nine. No going out after nine unless I'm driving somewhere. Can you talk to him?*

*Well, Jachin, you wanted to adopt him. You wanted to be his new daddy. What do you want me to say to him?*

*Adopt him, who said that, he asked?*

*You said that to him, Jachin. And that's why you asked him to get me to send his birth certificate and adoption papers. I'm a lawyer, Jachin. I helped re-write the entirety of Florida's adoption laws, I know what those documents are for. That and to try to get disability benefits for him, with you controlling the funds as his new dad.*

*I don't know what you're talking about, he said.*

*Yes, you do, I replied. Let's make a deal, Jachin. You put my son on a bus back to Florida and I won't report you to the authorities for exploitation of the disabled. Look me up if you haven't already. I'm extremely well connected.*

*He replied, You've got it all wrong. I want what's best for Ilya. I care about him deeply. I wouldn't do anything to harm him. He wanted me to adopt him. I didn't know you cared about him so much, but I can hear now that you do. He's an adult though. It's up to him to decide what he wants to do with his life. I can't force him to go back to Florida.*

*Perhaps I wasn't clear, Jachin, I said. I know who you are, and I know what you are trying to do. Your plans are not going to work. You picked the wrong person. You will make sure my son is on a bus back to Florida or you will be answering to my friends. Understood? Don't underestimate me.*

*I'll talk to Ilya, but he will be the one to decide what he wants to do, Jachin said, defiance in his voice.*

*You will make sure he makes the right decision, Jachin, I said.*

*If he comes back, is he going to be in any kind of trouble? Can I tell him he won't be in any trouble, he asked?*

*Ilya is in no trouble with me. He will have my full support to put his life back together.*

*Well, I'll talk to him. It's up to him. We'll call you tomorrow, Jachin said.*

*Five days later, I had my son back.*

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One Option  
October 2017

For the first couple weeks after Ilya returned from Missouri, he talked about finding a job and getting an apartment with friends. Despite my repeated urging, he wouldn't go back to the independent living program, telling me that he didn't want anyone to control him. As much as I felt he needed the program's supports, I felt it was hard to argue against his desire for full independence with what he had just been through. But I told him nobody was trying to control him in the program. They were just there to help, I said to time and again, just as they always had been. He wouldn't hear any of it. He told me that he would handle everything on his own.

He soon moved into an apartment with a friend I never met or heard of before. He had two roommates and they agreed, I was told, that Ilya could sleep on the couch for a couple of weeks while he looked for a job and found his own place. I called him regularly to check in and ask about his job search. He never had any specific information, just vague statements about going into stores and filling out applications, or saying he would be going out looking later in the day, or the next day. I told him that I didn't believe he had started a job search at all yet. He responded that he was just taking a few days off to relax and play video games.

On a Friday evening phone call, he said the roommates were complaining that he was eating their food and not getting any groceries. So, I said I would take him the grocery store Saturday morning. He was waiting outside when I arrived, so we drove straight to the store. We filled the trunk with food for them all.

On the way back to the apartment I told him he didn't seem to be motivated to look for a job and get his own place. I asked what I could do to help. He insisted that he was doing just fine and would get a job soon. I then asked if he was using any drugs. A friend had given him some marijuana, he told me, but that was it.

*The marijuana is killing your energy, I said, so you're not feeling like getting out there and putting your life back together. It's a sedative and not good for people with bipolar disorder, I explained. Do you want to get back on your medications, I asked? They could help you stay motivated, I said.*

*No way, he said, I'm not taking chemicals and I don't need the medicine anyway.*

*But you're doing drugs, I said, and they aren't helping you.*

*Pot is all natural, he said, it's not a chemical.*

*There's a chemical in the plant that makes it work, Ilya, it's called THC, I replied.*

*It's still natural, it's a plant, it grows in the ground, he said, and I've outgrown needing any pills.*

*Ilya, I hate to remind you of this, but I should, I said. You have to understand that you don't grow out of the medical conditions that developed before you were born. You need medication to cope with it best. It's like my asthma, I don't grow out of it, I just treat it with the meds. There's no shame in this. It's just a medical thing.*

*I said I'm not taking any pills. I don't want them. I do fine without them, he said, there's nothing wrong with me.*

When we got back to the apartment and took in the groceries, I saw that Ilya had pretty much taken over the living room. His clothes and bags were lined up around the room and I could see where he had been sitting in the middle of the sofa to play video games, the console and game cartridges spread out across the coffee table. I met the roommates, and they said they were happy for all the groceries. They didn't say anything about Ilya, instead going to their rooms after our brief meeting.

After they were out of earshot, I asked Ilya, *How long did they say you can you stay here?*

*Pretty much as long as I want, he said,*

*Well, I'm sure they will want their living room back at some point, I said, maybe consider going back to the independent living program if you need to.*

*I said no to that Dad, forget it. Stop bringing it up.*

Another week went by and he called to tell me that he was getting kicked out of the apartment. Neighbors accused him breaking in to steal from them.

*I didn't do it, Dad, he insisted.*

*Did you have some problem with them before? Argue about something else?*

No, he replied.

*Then why would they lie about you stealing, Ilya, I asked?*

*They claim I don't have a job and I'm trying to get money for drugs, but I didn't do it, Dad.*

*Well, you don't have a job and you told me you were doing pot, I said.*

*True, but not every day. And I'm no thief, he said.*

*So where are you getting the money for the pot, I asked?*

*I have money left, Dad.*

*Left from what? Last week you had no money for groceries and you don't have a job, I replied.*

*I pawned some stuff, he said.*

*So, you pawned stuff for drugs but not groceries. You're sounding like an addict, I said.*

*I'm not an addict, he said, the marijuana just makes me feel better. I don't do it every day.*

*Honestly, it sounds like you would if you could afford it, I replied, but the real question right now is, did they call the police? Are you going to be arrested?*

*No, they said they wouldn't call the cops if I leave the apartment.*

*Ok, you got lucky. So, where are you going? You can't stay where you are, obviously.*

*I have another friend who said I can crash at his place for a while.*

*Need a ride there, I asked?*

*No, he's gonna get me after work.*

*Ok, call me. Let me know how you're doing.*

In the weeks that followed, Ilya sounded more hostile every time we spoke. He demanded that I give him money for his own apartment, saying that he was "couch surfing," staying with different friends every few days, but couldn't stay any one place for long. When I asked, he still couldn't give me any details about a job search and admitted he continued to use marijuana. He said he did one other drug a friend gave him but wouldn't tell me what it was. *It was just once, Dad, I'm not doing it again,* he assured me.

*Ilya, it sounds like you've made a bunch of friends, but this is no way to live. Let's get you back into the independent living program, get you a roof over your head, get you some help, help you get a job, I said.*

*I'll get a job myself, he told me.*

*I hear you say that, but you've been saying that since you got back from Missouri and haven't even had one interview, as far as I know. The program would have helped you get several interviews and probably a job by now.*

*No, I can do this myself. No one's gonna control me.*

*Ilya, really, it's not about controlling you. They help you. They always have.*

*Dad, I'm not going back there. I'm not following anyone's rules. I can take care of myself. Later, dude. Then he hung up.*

In our next call, he asked for money. He needed to pay back money he borrowed from a friend, he said. *It's just sixty bucks*, he said. He sounded frantic.

*Who is this friend?*

*She's just a friend. She needs the money to pay someone else back.*

*Who does she need to pay back*, I asked?

*Her boss.*

*Ilya, is she a dealer?*

*No, her boss is. She just does deliveries.*

*Ilya. Get real. She's a dealer. He may be the supplier, but he's still a dealer and so is she. You're in debt to drug dealers. They could really hurt you if you don't pay them back.*

*No, Dad, you've got it all wrong. She's really nice. She'd never hurt me. No way.*

*Let's say you're right about that*, I replied. *Is her boss nice too? Drug traffickers don't have a sense of humor about money. If she doesn't pay him, because you don't pay her, she'll tell him that and he'll be after you.*

*He doesn't know me, Dad. Never met me*, he said.

*Ilya, this is how drug dealers work. They give you free stuff, call it a loan, you get addicted. You get desperate for more drugs, then they demand the money. Not just what you owe, but for interest and for the next batch too. You then do whatever you must to get that money – even stealing for it – and they've got their hooks in you. Just like the drugs do. You could really get hurt if you don't pay.*

*Well, then Dad, if they're gonna hurt me you've gotta give me the money. I don't have it, dude.* He sounded scared.

*You are asking me to buy your drugs, you understand that, right*, I asked?

*No, it's not like that. I'm not using your money to get more drugs. I just need to pay her back what I owe*, he said.

*I'm not buying your drugs, Ilya. You said you don't have a problem, but you obviously do if you are in debt to a dealer. You not only spent your last dollar on drugs, you spent dollars you don't even have yet on drugs. You need to face that fact and do something about it.*

*What do you want me to do*, he pleaded? *I don't have a job yet.*

*You need help, Ilya. You need to go back to the independent living program. You need a therapist, probably a twelve-step program, something, I said. And you can talk to the therapist about whatever is bothering you, me, a boss, adoption stuff, whatever it is you want.*

He told me again that he wouldn't go back to the program, but I was relieved when he agreed to try one session with a therapist if I could find him one and pay for it. I said I would, and I was able to get him one quickly through an advocate I knew at a disability support center.

*She's new here. I think he'll like her, the advocate told me, she's a recent college graduate. The young guys like her because she knows how to talk like them. And it doesn't hurt that she's really pretty.*

*Whatever works to get him talking, I replied.*

As he agreed, he tried one session. Then he went back for more, two or three times a week. The way he talked about the therapist gave me the impression he had developed a crush on her. I called the disability advocate to see what she was hearing. *I can't share what he might be talking to her about, of course, but she says he's really opened up to her. No problem getting him talking, she said.*

*Great stuff, I'm relieved, thanks so much, I said.*

Shortly after that conversation, Ilya's new therapist flipped through a notebook he carried around with him that was filled with his pencil sketches and diary entries of his random thoughts and occasional events in his life. I knew about the notebook. He regularly showed me his latest sketches.

He was showing her his artwork, which he was very proud of, but when she took hold of the book herself and looked through it, she came across a suicide note. He had addressed the note to me, telling me that he loved me, but that he felt he didn't belong here, that he had to go. He denied to her that he had a specific plan to end his life, saying he didn't mean what he wrote and wrote it a long time ago. He refused her suggestion that he go to a hospital and get help. He left her office in a fury. She called the police and declared him a likely risk to his own safety, then called me to tell me what was going on.

The police found Ilya in a Wal Mart parking lot after first calling his phone and arranging to meet him there, lying about why they needed to talk to him. They took him into custody and involuntarily admitted him to a psychiatric hospital. He didn't realize that's what they were doing until he got to the hospital, which made him even more angry. He felt like he had been tricked, which he had been. The sheriff's deputy explained it all to me when he called to say that Ilya was safely in the hospital. Under Florida law, they could keep him up to three days to get him stabilized and either convince him to agree to further care or get a judge to order continued involuntary care. If he was found not to be a danger to himself or others, he would be released instead.



Ilya was in the hospital less than a day before calling me early the next morning to pick him up. I drove over frustrated and confused. Once he was in the car, I asked him what happened in the hospital. He told me how angry he was that he was tricked and stuck there overnight.

*I don't belong with all these crazy people, Dad. I'm not nuts*, he complained. He was holding his notebook in his lap.

*Did you show the doctor your sketches*, I asked, motioning to his book? I was acted like I knew nothing about the suicide note.

*No*, he said.

*How long were you with the doctor*, I asked?

*About five minutes. He knew I wasn't fucking crazy*, he said.

He explained to me that the doctor asked him directly if he was going to hurt himself, which Ilya denied. The doctor asked him if he ever thought about hurting himself and intended to do it. No, Ilya had told him, he never had any plans to do that, and he wanted to leave.

I decided to be more direct. I told him that I was told he wrote a suicide note. I asked him if the doctor read the note. No, he told me, the doctor never asked about anything about a suicide note.

He asked me to drop him off at a friend's apartment. I worried about him staying safe, but he was so angry it was clear he would not do anything that I suggested. He had demanded to know if I was the one who called the police. I said I was not. He then said he knew it was his therapist, so he was never going to talk to her again. He was as angry in that moment as I had ever seen him.

I asked him one more time about the note, though, before dropping him off. *I need to know when you wrote that note, Ilya. Did you feel like that recently?*

*No, Dad, it was like a really old note. I'm not going to do anything stupid*, he assured me.

I called his therapist next. *Did the hospital call you about the suicide note*, I asked?

*No*, she said, *they didn't call me about anything*. She was shocked when I told her that they let him out so easily and so quickly.

*I told the police about the note*, she said, *they should have told the hospital*.

*Maybe they did*, I replied. *If the doctor spent as little time with Ilya as he told me, then he probably didn't care to be careful. We can't reverse it now though. What's done is done*.

I continued to worry about the suicide note, so I called Ilya more frequently than usual in the following weeks. He seemed fine though and told me his friend helped him get a job stocking

shelves in a store after closing. I was relieved at first that he at least got a job, but it didn't last long, just about a week. He told me he quit after an argument with his boss.

By the end of the year, Ilya was looking worse and worse each time that I saw him. He looked like he hadn't showered, his clothes were frequently dirty, and he sounded depressed most of the time, all the while claiming that he was "doing great." He started asking me for money in each call. He said he needed to pay his phone bill and needed more money for his bus pass.

*Ilya, I don't think I'd be doing you any good if I gave you cash right now. Whether you agree with me or not, I am concerned about your drug use. You're addicted and before you deny it, I don't expect you to admit that to me. But it's clearly holding you back. If you need food, I don't want you going hungry, I'll get you groceries.*

*I have food. I got a food stamp card, he told me. But I can't use it to pay for my phone. I will get a job. I just need some money in the meantime.*

*You need to get help to clean yourself up so you can get a job. You won't get hired looking like you do now, I replied. I don't think you'll succeed if I just give you cash. I think you'll just keep using and it will get worse. If you're not doing other drugs now, you soon will be. I love you, so I won't pay for that. I think it's time you went for drug treatment. I'll get you into a facility. Just let me know and I'll make it happen.*

*Whatever. I'm not an addict. I'll get money somewhere else. Later.* And he hung up.

Friends from church and family members were soon calling me to ask what was going on with Ilya. He was calling everyone to ask for money, saying he was having trouble getting a job and needed money for food and his phone bill, and that I was refusing to help him. His grandmother had already paid his phone bill, I found out from his aunt.

I told everyone not to help him and called everyone else I could think of who he might call for money. *We have to cut off all his options to get him into drug treatment, I said. He needs to have one option left and that is to go to a treatment program. Tell him to call me every time he calls you, I told them.* I even called the independent living program director and told her what was going on, saying that if he called to ask to come back into the program that she insist he get drug treatment first. She assured me that she would, that she would insist he go to treatment for at least thirty days if he wanted to get back into her program.

I then started calling everyone I could think of who could help me get him into a treatment program right away if he agreed to get help. I found that help quickly through a friend from our church, John, who had worked for years in the administration of drug treatment programs. *Michael, you know I love Ilya and I love you. Just call me and I'll make sure he gets a bed.*

The next call to me came from the independent living program director. *Ilya wants back into the program. I told him what we talked about. Minimum thirty days in drug treatment, then I will let him back in. I told him he had to call you. Michael, I think he's ready to go to treatment. I really hope so.*

I thanked her profusely and waited for Ilya's call, which came a few hours later. He was angry. He insisted that he didn't need treatment but would go because he had nowhere to live. *I'm not spending one single day after the thirty days. That's it. I don't need to be there.*

The morning he arrived to be admitted to the facility John arranged for, Ilya's anger was still seething. The admissions team at the facility called me. *We're here with Ilya. He says he wants to talk to you.* I could hear him screaming in the background.

*Should I talk to him, do you want me to,* I asked?

Yes, they said.

Ilya continued to scream when he got on the phone. *Nobody here knows how to do their fucking job,* he yelled at me.

*What do you mean, what are they doing wrong,* I asked?

*They have all these fucking dumb ass rules. They want me to sign something that fucking says I'll fucking follow their fucking rules. They want to take my phone away. That's bullshit. I'm an adult. You're a lawyer. You know it's my right to have my own fucking phone. Tell them,* he demanded.

*Well, yes and no,* I responded. *They can set safety rules. It's drug treatment. They don't want people calling their dealers. Maybe there are certain times you can use your phone. Why don't you ask them about that,* I asked?

He ignored my reply and kept ranting.

*And now they say I have to be here for thirty days, but it doesn't start until after I go through detox. I was clear I'm not staying here one day after thirty. And I'm not on any drugs, why the fuck do I have to go through detox? This is fucking bullshit. And guess what, they said I have to take my medications after detox. I'm not taking any fucking chemicals.*

I was stunned at the level of his anger and overwhelmed with fear they wouldn't let him in, believing that if he wasn't motivated to be there, there was no use letting him in. I decided to remind him what I could relate to that he was going through.

*Well, Ilya, I hear you,* I said. *But I don't run the facility. I don't set their rules. Their facility, they get to decide what rules to put in place. But understand something. You know I was in a hospital for while for my abuse recovery. I took meds. I had a minimum stay requirement. I couldn't even have shoelaces in my shoes or my sweatpants – they thought I would tie them together and hang myself with them. They didn't care that my pants were falling down – no strings. I wasn't allowed to have my phone there either. But it was no big deal in the end.*

*This place is fucking bogus, he replied, I'll stay the thirty days, not one day longer. And fuck the rest of their rules. I'm definitely not taking the meds. I don't want them. I don't need them. I'll leave before I take those fucking meds.*

*Let me talk to them about that, Ilya. Let me see what I can do, I said.*

*Tell them to do their fucking jobs, he yelled before getting off the phone.*

The admissions team then had me back on speaker phone. It was quiet in the background.

*Can he hear me, I asked? It's gone quiet.*

*No. He's back in the next room. He's still hollerin'.*

*Ok, listen, I'm real sorry about all the screaming and cursing. I didn't raise him like that.*

*We know that. Don't worry about it. We don't take it personally. Happens here all the time. He's just in withdrawal already, one voice told me.*

*He doesn't sound willing to be there. Will you still accept him if we can convince him to stay, I asked?*

*Before they could answer, I said further, Please, he's my son. I love him more than I could ever describe. I'm afraid. I'm afraid he'll be killed on the streets, by someone he crosses or some drug he takes. He's a good person but he needs a lot of help. He's got disabilities, adoption grief, there's so much going on with him. He's just overwhelmed and turned to drugs to stifle his pain. He really needs your help. I'm begging you to let him in. His mind isn't clear right now. I'll work with you, whatever you need from me you will get. I'll help get him motivated.*

*Mr. Dolce, very few people arrive here fully motivated and with a clear mind, a different voice replied. We know he needs to be here. He's not able to think clearly and we know that. He's definitely on a few different drugs right now. But he hasn't said he wants to leave. He came through the door by himself. He's got some motivation. We didn't call to tell you we're rejecting him. He just has a right during intake to call whoever he wants. He wanted to call you.*

*I couldn't respond right away, choking back my tears. Well, I'm glad for that. But let me offer some help to you. Hopefully it helps anyway. It sounds to me – and knowing him as I do – the one thing that would make him walk out is if you insist that he has to take his meds, I said.*

*Well, that is our rule, a voice replied. He has diagnosed disorders, including bipolar, and treatment efficacy can be compromised too much, even be useless, if he's not on his meds. But here's what I can do. The psychiatrist isn't here today. I can tell Ilya that he doesn't have to agree now. He can just speak to the psychiatrist after detox and tell him why he doesn't need his meds. I'll tell him its then up to the psychiatrist to decide. That ok with you, Mr. Dolce?*

*Yes, of course, whatever you need to do. I'm just so grateful. Thank you for all you do, I said.*

*OK, we'll take it from here. We'll get him in, don't worry about it.*

I got off the phone and wept with relief. I called Mandy next and gave her the good news.

Ilya stayed at the treatment facility for over two months, not even mentioning the thirty day mark when it came and went. He agreed to take his medications after meeting with the psychiatrist, who insisted that he take them. We were allowed to visit Ilya during visiting hours after he finished detox and his treatment was underway. He looked better than he had in a very long time. He was clean, his hair had been cut, he looked relaxed, and most importantly he was smiling. When we spoke, he told us how much he liked the program and believed it was helping him. We were so relieved to have Ilya back.

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Bonfire  
April 2018

I got a call from Ilya's Aunt Helen. Ilya was twenty-four now, living out on his own, though with some help since leaving the drug treatment facility. His independent living program was still gently helping him find his way down a bumpy road, his life coach Eric still an important guide in his life. Eric helped him get the apartment in a rural part of Palm Beach County, just past the western edge of the suburbs. It was one of four in a row on a small ranch, but just a short walk to a bus stop that he could use to get pretty much anywhere he wanted to go. His bus pass, that cost a modest flat fee each month, discounted based on his disabilities, was still his ticket to get around the county for work, or to visit friends or get to our church.

*Ilya needs to go the hospital*, Helen told me when I answered her call. She was going to pick him up from his apartment and take him there, but she wouldn't be able to stay very long. I assured her that I was on my way and thanked her for picking him up. She lived much closer to him now than I did.

Helen was among those Ilya trusted most, so I wasn't surprised that he called her when he was in need or even that he called her first. He called, she told me, to ask how to treat burns he had suffered on his legs. He had burned them a few days earlier but hadn't told anyone. He bandaged them himself, he explained to her, but the pain was still really intense. Ilya had a high threshold for physical pain, so I knew that it must be bad when I heard that he was actually complaining about pain.

Helen had him send her a photo with his phone. *It looks terrible*, she said to me, *I'm worried that it might already be badly infected*.

Infections and sepsis were among the serious risks that came with major burns, I knew. When I arrived at the hospital, Helen had already left. She called me while I was still on the way to tell me that he was already past triage and in a room in the emergency department. Just inside the door, I was confronted with a long line to check in at the security desk. Anxiety overwhelmed me as I waited my turn. I was fixated with worry on the chance of a serious infection given how many days had already gone by. I needed to see my child, to see that he was all o.k. I kept telling myself that Ilya must be all right, it was just his legs that were burned, he would recover from that. Helen had just seen him, for crying out loud, I told myself. She wouldn't have left if he was in any serious trouble.

When I finally got past the security desk and into the emergency department, I found Ilya lying in bed in a room just across from the nurses' station, watching TV while talking to a nurse at his side.

"Hey Dad," he said as I entered. He looked worried, but also distracted. I figured it was the nurse, who he probably felt was pretty and I figured I was intruding on him wanting to chat her up. I looked at his legs. His makeshift bandages had been removed and the wounds not rebanded yet.

The insides of his legs were badly and completely burned from his ankles to his knees, the wounds large, red and black, and raw.

When I saw him like this, I felt a sensation that I had never felt before, a mixture of despair and horror, seeing my child more badly injured than I had ever seen him, but relieved to see that he was alive, that his face was fine, that I could see his expressions. I could see him toughing out the pain, as he always did, wincing from time to time, but sloughing off any suggestion of concern. *It's not too bad*, he told me. He was still my child, the essence of him, his presence fully intact. His cheerful, "Hey Dad," when I arrived, had comforted me.

The nurse finished wrapping his bandages and stepped out of the room. As soon as she did, Ilya said, "Dad, they took my blood."

"Not all of it hopefully," I joked.

"Dad, seriously," he responded, something he always said when I was making light of a situation. He told me he was worried that they would find marijuana in his system and call the police. Now I knew why he looked distracted when I arrived. He had been using it again, he confessed, qualifying it with, "but not a lot."

I wasn't surprised when he told me. I knew that since leaving the drug treatment program, he had quit taking his medications again. He continued insisting that he didn't need them, insisting again that he had outgrown any need for them.

I assured him the emergency room doctor could care less about his marijuana use and that he wouldn't call the police on him. *That's not the way it works*, I told him.

*Then why'd they take my blood*, he challenged me? His tone was suspicious, as if I might want them to call the police, to stop him from using.

*The blood draw is to check for infection from your wounds. It's all confidential medical information now*, I assured him, *the doctor can't give it to the police unless you tell him it's ok. You gonna tell him to call the cops on you*, I asked?

*No, duh, I'm not stupid, Dad*, he said.

*You are for using weed again*, I retorted, *but that's beside the point. You're here because half your legs are burned. How'd this happen?*

His explanations about what happened seemed to be changing depending on who he was talking to in the moment. Helen gave me one version on the phone that he had told her. Now, several details were different. But certain parts of the story were consistent. He had started a bonfire in a pit outside his apartment. The pit had been there since before he moved in; this I knew, I had seen it. The fire pit was large, about eight feet in diameter and surrounded by a ring of large stones. He was alone when he got burned, he told me. He found a gasoline can with gas in it and poured



the gas onto the fire, to get it going, he said. As he poured, he leaned over a bit and the flames leapt up and burned him.

*Were you standing in the pit at the time*, I asked? He denied that he was standing inside the pit when he got burned, but it made no sense. The fronts of his legs were not burned. The burns were consistent with him straddling the fire, not standing in front of it or even reaching over it. The flames must have risen up between his legs, not in front of them, to inflict the burns where they were. He had to have been pouring the gas straight down onto the fire when he got burned. If the fire leapt up in front of him, he would have instinctively stepped backwards, still risking only burns to the front of his legs. So, he must have been standing over the pit, inside of it, and he had to know that the flames would leap up in between his legs.

Thinking through it all, I told him I needed to step out to call my office to check in. I left him watching TV and walked out, headed around the opposite side of the nurses' station and asked a nurse if I could speak privately with Ilya's doctor. She told me to wait where I was standing. After about ten minutes, a doctor approached me, introducing himself.

*I'm not sure my son's burns were an accident*, I told him.

*I know*, he said, *I had the same thought, though I'm not sure he wanted to die. I think he may have simply not cared if he lived. But he'll be safe with us for a while*, he continued, *I'm transferring him to the Miami Burn Center*. Ilya would be transported the seventy miles by ambulance, he told me.

He explained that Ilya would need time to heal and would need skin grafts, followed by physical therapy. It would be several weeks before he was discharged, giving me time to try to figure out his mental health. He intended to alert the Burn Center that the burns might not have been accidental.

But by the time Ilya was discharged from the Burn Center several weeks later, he seemed fine, well grounded, ready to get back to regular life and get a job. He showed up at church all smiles the following Sunday and helped me teach my class. He relished the attention he got from all the well-wishers who had heard of burn incident. So many hugs for him that day. I felt that he was o.k., that he was back on track. Despite my earlier worries that he might have stepped into the bonfire on purpose, I dismissed any concern from my mind that he was a risk of harm to himself. He was home and he was well.



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## One Way Ticket, Again August 2018

It would be the second time that Ilya boarded a bus destined for Missouri to build a new life for himself. This time, he assured us, there would be no Jachin involved. He was going back to be with other friends he had made while he was working there briefly. His plan was simple and familiar. Stay with friends he had kept in touch with there, they would help him find his way around, get a job. He would then find a place to live, probably with a roommate.

Despite the assurances that Jachin was not involved, and believing that was probably true, Mandy and I were very worried about Ilya. He had not had much time to stabilize since the suicide note was found, since the drug treatment program, since the suspicious fire pit burn, and he had not really had a chance to stand up on his own since it all. If things did not go well for him in Missouri as he planned, his track record on how he would deal with that was not good. We felt he should stay in Florida near us and everyone he knew to help him find his way, to pick him up if he fell down.

But maybe he knew better, I thought. Maybe he just needed a fresh start, somewhere few people knew him, a chance to make a lasting positive first impression, not tainted by the mistakes or reputation of the past. Maybe the only way he would feel truly successful was to make it on his own, without family help, without the independent living program helping. Maybe he needed to be relying only on himself to really be motivated to take responsibility, each day, for how his life was. Perhaps leaving the safety net behind was the motivation he would need.

As he prepared to leave, Ilya continued to talk with his Mama Mandy almost daily. He had come to talk to her much more often than he did me. Luke loved to join in the conversations with his big brother too. Mandy convinced Ilya to wait to leave until after his birthday celebration in late August, so Luke could have a party with him in person. She made a plan to celebrate with Luke and some friends at a Chuck E. Cheese, playing video games, enjoying the little kids' rides, eating pizza they both loved.

At the party, Ilya devoted most of his attention to his little brother, the two of them overjoyed with their time together. Mandy and I hoped that in the weeks waiting for the party and the party itself would cause Ilya to change his mind about leaving Florida. But the next morning, he boarded a bus and headed west, with no incidents to delay his arrival this time.

In all of our calls with him in the weeks that followed, he was happy and optimistic. There was no mention of Jachin. He stumbled at his first job in Missouri. It ended in just two weeks after he tried to tell his boss how to do his job. It was forgotten now. He had settled into a new job at Burger King and had been promoted to shift leader already.

He had a girlfriend and was living with her and a few roommates. He had just bought an old used car for a song and was looking forward to driving it. It was destined to need more repairs than he

could afford, but it was a start. He was so excited when he called to tell me all about it, speaking so fast he ran out of breath. He couldn't even remember the make of the car. It didn't matter. It was a car. Everything seemed to be going the right way for him. I was grateful and hopeful. And proud.

Thanksgiving and Christmas without him felt unsettling though. I talked to Brian at church about my feelings. He reassured me though, *Michael, this is what you want. You raise your children and send them out into the world to join other communities, raise their own families. This is what you have worked so hard for.*

I settled into accepting Brian's words. Ilya had so much of what he wanted, and he had achieved it quickly since setting out halfway across the country from where he was raised. Most important to him, he achieved it on his own. He was independent, out on his own, building a life for himself. He had a job he liked. He had friends and co-workers he got along well with. He was loved by his girlfriend and her family. He was keeping in touch with us, especially regular calls with Mandy and Luke. He had goals and hope to get a better home to share with his girlfriend, even advance further at work beyond the promotion that he had just earned before Christmas.

It is ok to be at peace with it all, I told myself. It has been a hard road, but what I feared might not work was actually working. He was making his own way in the world without active help from anyone else. Ilya had learned a lot about the realities of life through plenty of ups and downs over many years. Your son is battle tested but not battle weary, I told myself, digging deep into my own past growing up in an Army town for that mantra. You survived and thrived all that you went through, I reassured myself, your son will too.

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I love you  
February 27, 2019

I was in Washington D.C. the last week of February, arriving on Monday to unseasonably warm weather. The weather had gone cold by Wednesday, the low forty's that afternoon, a fifteen-degree dip from the days before. I spent that morning in my law firm's headquarters in the heart of D.C.'s business district before boarding the subway at Metro Center, just a block away. I took the train to Bethesda, Maryland, just outside the DC boarder, about a thirty minute ride.

I loved the D.C. subway. I had spent a year going to college in the city in 1987 and 1988, while also volunteering at a national presidential campaign headquarters on K Street, the quintessential address for D.C. politics. I had no car. It was too expensive just to park a car in the city. So I took the subway everywhere. To my eighteen-year-old sensibilities, the crowded trains were pure energy, packed with so many important looking and sharply dressed people talking about business and politics, many even from other countries and cultures. I heard multiple languages around me daily. I dreamed of one day joining the ranks of the city's political elite. The whole atmosphere was so different from the suburban Army town that I grew up in. It was just eighty miles away, but I might as well have been on the other side of the world. I felt completely at home in D.C. and could not imagine living anywhere else the rest of my life.

But I left after less than a year, in April 1988, before my final exams even ended. I was shocked, ashamed and heartbroken when the FBI arrived at my family home to arrest my father for espionage that month. On my nineteenth birthday, my older brother called me to explain what was happening, that our father had spent two days in our living room confessing to federal agents that he stole military secrets from his job as a U.S. Army weapons analyst at Aberdeen Proving Ground and gave them to military attaches of the apartheid government of South Africa, who were based in the country's D.C. embassy. He was the first American spy for that country.

His lawyer would soon try to characterize him as a "misguided patriot" who simply wanted to help stop the spread of communism in Africa during the Cold War. He was giving away American intelligence information about weaknesses in Soviet weaponry that Cuba had been giving to Angolan communist forces in that nation's ongoing civil war that began in 1975, when Portugal ended its colonial rule there. South Africa's government was supporting anti-communist guerilla forces in that war, but the U.S. had embargoed any military assistance to that government in protest over its apartheid policies.

But my father was no patriot. He knew it was a crime to break the embargo. He supported the South African government's systemic racial discrimination and oppression of the majority of its peoples simply because they were not white.

The FBI had not yet revealed my father's crimes to the press, but it was destined to make headlines nationwide when it did, including in *The Washington Post*, the very newspaper I read carefully every day to learn all that I could about the politics of the day.

Some thirty years later, I found my way back, at least partially, to the city I loved. I had been hired as a lawyer in the Florida office of one of the nation's largest and most esteemed plaintiffs law firms. I was placed in charge of a litigation team devoted to representing sex crime victims, predominantly children, beginning with the cases I had brought with me to the firm, but now the case load had grown much larger. We were the first national law firm to focus an entire team on that area of law. My team's work was gaining more and more attention monthly as the firm devoted substantial resources to our efforts.

To me, the work was not even work. It was a mission, one that empowered me as a survivor myself, as I ratcheted off the predators I helped imprison, keeping them away from their next victim, and the institutions I made answer for failing to keep children safe when they could and should have. I was saving children I would never know from my walk of life and I could imagine nothing better for me to do than that.

The previous fall, my team's efforts culminated in our being hired to represent several young children who had been sexually abused by a teacher at a prominent D.C. preschool. An estimated fifteen children were tragically abused over a two-year period before a child finally spoke up and alerted her parents. Two major criminal investigations were underway and I was conducting my own investigation as well. It was the biggest case of my career. I was determined to ensure that the predator was brought to justice and the school officials held accountable for not preventing him from abusing such young, fragile children.

The case had been bringing me back to D.C. at least every other week for meetings with lawyers and law enforcement officials, with the families I represented and witnesses I was interviewing. Despite the horrific circumstances of the case, which like all my cases were gut wrenching to face, and despite all the effort involved in what was proving to be twelve to fourteen hour work days, I was enjoying my return to the city. The energy that once made me fall in love with it was still there, motivating me as much as it did when I was in college and working on the campaign.

The only difference was, I no longer looked around me on the subway at people doing important jobs that could change the world, yearning to join them. I was now one of them. I found myself reflecting on that fact that last Wednesday of February as I traversed the city to do my job. When the train arrived in Bethesda, I walked several blocks from the subway stop to the restaurant where I was to meet with another lawyer who was helping a family connected with the case. I kept my scarf wrapped snugly around my neck and my long black overcoat buttoned to ward off the cold during the brisk walk until I reached the restaurant's entrance.

The restaurant was packed, but our reserved table was waiting for us. It was a new favorite place among the professional set, the latest in gourmet and healthy food. I didn't know what half the things on the menu were, as I skimmed through it while making small talk with the other lawyer. With all my food allergies and preference for simple food, I picked the most innocuous salad I could find, with a soup he recommended on the side.

Midway through our lunch, I got a text message from Ilya stating simply, "I love you." I glanced at it, just long enough to wonder what was coming next. He was not one to reach out just to say

that. I joked to my lunch companion that my son must need something, probably a phone bill to be paid. That request was surely to follow his expression of love, I quipped. Before resuming our talk about the case, I took a few moments to tell him a bit about Ilya, about how a few months earlier he had boarded a bus leaving Florida destined for Missouri, to stay with a few friends, to see the world, but most of all to find his own way in it. I told him I was proud of how quickly he had made so many more friends, found a job and his own place to live. He was doing very well, I said.

As we wrapped up our lunch meeting, I looked back at my phone and realized the request for money never followed the, "I love you." In fact, nothing else came. So, as I walked back to the subway stop to head to my next meeting, I called him. No answer. I called again. No answer. I then called Mandy.

She had gotten the same "I love you" message, she told me, then nothing. I hung up with her and called him again. No answer. But seconds later, I got another text from him, "Today is my day."

I feared in an instant that he was suicidal. I tried to find some other interpretation in what he wrote but could not. Then I thought of the gun. He bought it a couple months earlier after someone, late at night, knocked at the door of the house he was renting with his girlfriend and some roommates. It was freezing outside. Right after he knocked, the man moved aside the door and stood right near the window and looked inside. Ilya wasn't home, he was at work, but his girlfriend was there. It scared her. So, he bought the gun for protection, he told me.

*That's not necessary*, I had urged him at the time. *Probably just someone at the wrong door. Wouldn't have knocked if he meant any harm.* But no, Ilya was not taking any chances, he told me. *Better off with some protection*, he said. *Don't worry*, he reassured me; he had already signed up for safety lessons at the gun range.

At the time, I had a fleeting thought that he was not someone who should have a gun. Someone who had hardly a year earlier contemplated suicide, wrote about it, ended up in a psychiatric hospital, maybe stepped into a bonfire on purpose, should not have a gun. *No, he's doing fine. He'll be fine*, I reassured myself. *He's a good young man, finding his way in the world. Let him puff up and guard the door.* And the thought was banished.

It came back with his text message. But he is loved. He won't go. This won't be his day, I tried to reassure myself. But I still have to take this seriously, very seriously, I thought next.

I tried calling him again. Still no answer. By now I was at the subway stop and heading down the long escalator to the platform. I called Mandy back as I reached the bottom. I glanced at my watch and saw I had plenty of time to get back downtown for my next meeting. I decided it was best to head back up the escalator in case I lost my cellphone signal, which almost always happened on the subway.

As I rode the escalator back to street level while talking to Mandy, another text message arrived. Again, it was, "I love you"

“Mandy,” I said, “I just got another ‘I love you’ text.”

Back at street level now, I stepped out of the flow of bustling pedestrians off the escalator and typed back to Ilya with Mandy still on the phone. “Love you too. All ok?” Mandy told me that she had not heard anything else from him.

His reply came right away. “Dad I’m ready to go”

“Don’t call”

“I’m sorry! I love you and everyone”

Fear gripped my entire body. There was no doubt left that he intended to die. My mind raced trying to figure out what to do. I told Mandy what he had just texted and asked her if she had his new home address. “Yes,” she said. “Call the police, get them there. He’s suicidal.” We hung up and I tried calling Ilya again.

No answer.

I tried again. No answer.

I tried again. No answer.

Oh God, no, this can’t be happening, I thought.

I typed. “What are you doing. Please do not do anything to hurt yourself. We love you whatever is wrong we can help”

His reply came right away. “I’m ready to die dad”

By now, I could hardly hold the phone still to operate it. I tried calling. No answer.

“Please do not hurt yourself,” I typed frantically.

“We love you. Whatever is wrong we can absolutely”

“Today is my day”

I tried calling again. Several times. He didn’t answer.

I called Mandy again. “Are the police on the way?” “Yes.” “God, I hope he’s at home. I need to keep trying to reach him.”

I hung up with her and called him again. No answer.

I typed.

“Please”

“Please call”

“Please call me”

“No” he answered right away.

I kept trying to call him.

I saw a small convenience store near the bus loop. I ran in and asked the woman behind the counter to call 911. She looked confused, seeing my phone in my hand. *My son wants to kill himself. I need to speak to someone, but I need to keep this phone open. I am trying to get him to call me.*

She didn’t say anything in response. Just stared at me, her mouth hanging open and picked up the store phone. She dialed 911 and handed me the phone as she ushered a customer behind me to the counter.

The 911 operator asked me what my emergency was. *My son is texting me, he’s suicidal*, I said.

*Where’s your son now?*

*He’s in Ozark, Missouri.*

*This is Montgomery County, Maryland, you need to call 911 in Missouri.*

*My wife already did that. I need to talk to someone here. I need help.*

*There’s nothing we can do. Your son is in Missouri.*

*I know that. I’m texting him and trying to call him. I need help. I don’t know what to say to him or what not to say. Please just send a police officer.*

*Where exactly are you?*

*I’m at the Bethesda Metro stop. Next to the bus loop.*

*What’s the door number where you’re calling from?*

*I don’t know – don’t you know? Doesn’t it come up automatically on your screen? I’m on a landline. Just send the police to the bus loop, I’ll flag them down. Please hurry. Fuck. I don’t know what to say to him! What if I say the wrong thing? Please.*

*What is it exactly you think a police officer can do for you?*

*The officers are trained, aren’t they, in what to do when someone is threatening suicide. They can help me know what to text or if he calls what to say. Please. I’m not trained for this. This is my son for the love of God, please just fucking send someone.*

I didn’t wait for his response. I put the phone on the counter and left the store. I was panicking wildly now. I couldn’t stand still. I kept walking several yards, then dropping my bag to type the



next text, before picking the bag back up and walking again. I was looking around frantically for the police. I worried they might not come. But I needed help. They must be coming, I told myself. They'll send someone. Why wouldn't they? But I saw none.

I texted Ilya again. "We're here for you. Please call me"

"No because I'm going to do it today"

"Please do not do this. Whatever it is we can help"

"I love you"

I ran up the sidewalk a block to the main street, hoping I would see a police car I could flag down. Nothing but cars, a bus heading for the loop and some cabs.

I couldn't imagine what had triggered this moment for Ilya, what had gone wrong. Everything was going right for him. But then I thought of what I knew, that people who suffer depression often lose hope when everything is going well and they still don't feel better.

"I love you too," he replied to me.

"Please try to talk this through," I texted back.

"I was so great full to have a family that loves me"

"Please do not give up on yourself. Luke loves you so much."

"I love him too," he replied.

There were only seconds of pause between each message. I've got to keep him going, I thought, keep him communicating.

"He will not be I'll able to understand why you are gone please do not do this," I wrote.

"Dad you knew this day would come"

"No absolutely not. Please do not do this"

"I'm tired of living"

I headed back to the bus loop, looking to see if a police car had gotten there from some other entrance. I saw at least one other way in. But I saw no police.

Moments later a long text arrived from Ilya, so soon from the last one that it was certainly written in advance.



“Hello life. I’ve always had a drug of choice. That drug was pain. The relapse is depression. My skin is the canvas of bark. On a tree that gets cut by the wind ... Breathing is the hardest thing I have ever had to do ... Because no matter how much I try to take the one last breath ... Air keeps seeping in. My blood as thick as sap. Always finds a way to stop ... No matter how much I cut ... I can definitely say. I am sorry mother. I am sorry father. I wish you could know how much I hide the pain of forgiveness in my heart. ... Life in my eyes was different then anyone in our family. I’m the only one that was adopted. For better or worse ... It still aces me to know a piece of my life has been ripped out.

I wish people could see the pain in my eyes! My soul as far as the stars ... In an empty blackness. I cut for feelings, for forgiveness, for sadness, for regret, for comfort, for the parts of me that have been lost ... I cut ... & I cut ... To hope the feeling go away... I feel like I was always the weird, out cast in the family ... My sister was always the good one ...

I am proud that she is. Because she is a strong, young, beautiful, lady that always strived to make sure she took care of herself. I am very happy that she didn’t have to go throw the things that I have had too in my life. The things I put myself threw. The things I have put the family threw. I was always so happy with her smarts, I remember the times I upset you & and I would do something silly till you laughed!!

Dad it has taken me years to understand things you were trying to teach me! Please don’t cry ... I know this aces you so ... We have truly been threw thick and thin ... I became a man. Because of you!!  
I love you all!”

I read as fast as I could, got to the end and tried calling again, still desperately looking for an arriving police car. Ilya didn’t answer.

I texted him again, “We can absolutely fix this please”

“Only one that can fix this is me,” he shot back.

“Please talk to me before you do anything”

“I am,” he wrote.

“Would you be willing to please call me?”

“I just want to die in peace.”

“Ilya everybody loves you. You do not need to do this. Please let me help you.”

“I can’t keep fighting my pain”

“I know life can be painful, but we can help you with that.”

“With the support of others, the struggle is easier.”

“I can’t dad”

“I just can’t”

“I’m sorry”

“Today is my day”

“Please just try to wait a few minutes, take some breaths and see if you’re up to calling me”

“I love you all very much”

“For the love of God, please call me”

“Why”

“I just want to chance to talk to you”

“I’m not angry, I just want to help”

“Why the fuck should I live” he wrote back. Oh God, I thought, I have to find some sense of worth him.

As fast as I could, I texted back, “Because God would not create a beautiful person to just destroy themselves.”

“You have so much to offer,” I added.

“I want to help myself be free”

“You can be free without dying”

“All I wanna do is fucking die”

“That’s all I’ve wanted for years”

Oh God, I’m running out of time, I thought. This isn’t working. I must find common ground.

I wrote to my son, “I know what it’s like to feel like that. I have, based on my past, thought about killing myself along time ago.”

“But I did not do it I am glad. Because there is so much you can get out of life is so much you have to offer”

“We can work on your struggles together”

“How do you know what it feels like,” he wrote back.

“Because I felt terrible and worthless about myself and wanted to kill myself. I struggled through for you and for Sarah and I am glad that I did”

“The pain is simply you’re mine’s way of telling you that things need to be changed in your life. We can help you achieve the change for peace”

With that, my phone finally rang. It was Ilya. I believed in that moment that he would be safe. I just needed to talk to him. I could talk him out of this, give him hope, get him help. I was certain.

But I felt the need to have the police with me more than ever. I scanned the bus loop and looked up the street. Nothing. I needed help to know what to say. And what not to say. But they weren't coming. I stopped looking to focus completely on the conversation.

*Thank you for calling. I love you. Please let me help you,* I said.

*I can't find my peace,* Ilya said to me.

*I can help. I love you. We all love you. We can fix whatever is wrong,* I pleaded. *Tell me what's going on.*

*No, Dad. There's nothing going on. I just can't find my peace.*

Abundance, I need to emphasize abundance, I thought. I had been in child abuse recovery meetings with so many other survivors who talked about not being able to see all the good in their lives and the people they are important to.

*Mandy loves you – she's your mom. Luke loves you. You're his only brother. You have a girlfriend. She loves you. There's so much love and help for you here.*

*I know that,* he said, *I know I am loved. But I can't find peace,* he said.

*Your sister loves you very much. You're her big brother, please don't leave her.*

*I love her too. I'm very proud of her.*

How do I buy time, I thought?

*Listen, let me come see you,* I said. *I will fly there right away. I can be there tonight, no later than the morning.*

*No, Dad.*

Then I thought maybe he needed to get away from there, that something was wrong there, but he didn't have the money to leave.

*Or I can buy you a ticket to fly somewhere,* I said. *We'll meet somewhere. Have a little vacation. It doesn't have to be Florida. We could just go see Uncle Linus,* I added, *you loved going to the monastery. It's not far to St. Louis.*

*No, I can't,* he said right away.

*Let me help you. I've never dropped you. You know that. I've always been there for you.*

*I know, Dad. But it's my time to go. Today.*

Oh God. What might be missing, what does he need, I asked myself?

*Do you need help getting a new home or something, an apartment? I can help with that. I know we talked about it before, maybe I can co-sign a lease. I can help with the car. Whatever is wrong, let me help please.*

*No, I just need to find my peace,* he said. He sounded so calm in the moment, oddly mature to be so assured in what he needed for himself.

Oh God, nothing's working, I thought.

*We can fix this. I can help you find peace, Ilya. Please let me come see you. Or we can meet somewhere else. Please give me a chance.*

"Did you call the police," he asked me abruptly? The sense of calm was gone. There was pure anger in his voice.

I was momentarily relieved though. Thank God he's at home so they could find him, I thought.

"No, I didn't. I'm just talking to you. I've been talking or texting you the whole time," I said.

"Did you call the police," he demanded second time? I could hear the sense of betrayal in his voice.

"No, I did not," I said, trying in my mind to figure out if I should mention that maybe Mandy called. I decided not to. "I'm just talking to you. I've been talking to you this whole time, you know that. I love you," I said.

A second later, I heard a gunshot.

41

A Thousand Miles  
February 28, 2019

A police officer picked up the phone off the ground aside my son, saw that it was on, and talked into it. "Hello, this is the Ozark police, is someone on the phone?"

*I'm Michael Dolce, I'm Ilya's dad. Please tell me what's going on.*

*Did you call 911, he asked?*

*No, my wife did. He's my son. Please tell me what's going on.*

*Where are you located, sir, he asked?*

*I'm in DC at the moment, on business, I live in Florida, I replied.*

*Give me a minute to get back to my car, he said. A few moments later, I heard a car door close, and he spoke again. I don't usually do this over the phone, I'm sorry. But you're so far away. Sir, your son is being taken by ambulance to the hospital. He sustained a gunshot wound. He paused before adding, self-inflicted.*

*It all felt surreal. I couldn't speak at first.*

*The officer spoke again. He's alive. The paramedics were right behind me when I arrived. I can give you the number for the hospital, so you can call there. Again, I'm sorry to have to tell you this on the phone.*

*It's ok, I understand. I need to know the truth, I said to him. Where did he shoot himself? The officer didn't respond. On his body, where on his body, I asked?*

*The officer's long pause in answering felt like an eternity to me. His head, he finally responded, I'm really sorry.*

*From the subway stop, I called close friends from high school, Ken and Vicki, who lived just the other side of D.C. Vicki answered. I can't function, I said, Ilya just attempted suicide. He shot himself in his head. I need you to come get me. I can't even get on the subway. I can't stop crying.*

*It would take half an hour for her to get to me, she said, but she would leave right away. I went back to the convenience store and bought a bottle of water that I never opened. The clerk who had called 911 for me just stared at me in silence. Then I walked around to the other side of the bus loop and into a Dunkin Donuts and bought a cup of coffee. I stood at a high-top table and tried to take sip. I couldn't swallow. I threw the cup out.*

Feeling a need to keep moving, I went back outside and started to walk a circle around the bus loop. A man was standing outside the entrance to the subway, playing jazz on a saxophone, the case open in front of him for tips. The sound of the music was suddenly intolerable to me. I retreated to the Dunkin Donuts to escape it. I called the number for the hospital the police officer gave me and left a message for his doctor to call me when he could. I prayed for Ilya to survive and recover.

Vicki arrived and drove me to my hotel to get my luggage from the room. Ilya's doctor returned my call on our way. He told me that Ilya was alive but was on life support. He asked if I was coming to Missouri. *Yes, I told him, I will be there on the first flight I can get.*

He told me that he was sorry to have to tell me these things on the phone, but I needed to know, he said, that the bullet did a lot damage. "It's not likely your son will survive this," he said. I couldn't stay on the phone after he said that. Vicki cried with me as we drove the rest of the way, got my bags and headed to her house.

When we got to there, Ken greeted me at the door with a long hug and we all made our way to kitchen table. I tried to look up plane flights on my phone. I couldn't do it though. The list of flight option that filled the screen were too complex for me to handle. I simply couldn't focus on anything at all. I handed Ken my credit card and driver's license and asked him to please find me the next flight to Springfield, Missouri. About ten minutes later, he told me there were no flights that night, I would have to go in the morning, but he had booked the first one out for me.

I called my older brother to ask him and the monks to pray for Ilya. He said they would do that, and he would drive to Springfield to meet me at the hospital when I arrived.

When Vicki put food out, it still felt nearly impossible for me to swallow. As it got late, I made my way to the guest room but I couldn't sleep more than 20 minutes at a time. My crying never stopped for more than a few minutes. I prayed all night for a miracle, that my boy would recover. I asked God to please save my son. I asked God for that more times than I can count.

During the plane ride, two gregarious men across the aisle from me were looking forward to the weekend with their kids, each with a full schedule already mapped out, broad smiles to each other as they shared their plans. I imagined that I could still have another weekend with Ilya. I prayed for it for a thousand miles, prayed that I could be like the two men were.

I simply could not believe that my son might die from the bullet in his head, despite what the doctor had told me. Despite all we had been through with the suicide note his therapist found, despite the possibility that Ilya stepped into a bonfire on purpose, despite knowing that mental health conditions like his had killed others before him, I simply could not believe that my son would succeed in ending his own life. I had never believed that it was actually possible.

With all that I went through in life, my young life defined by one unlikely trauma after another, leaving me on the dawn of my own adulthood believing that the next tragedy was just around the corner, I could not believe that God would let this would happen. I did not believe that yet another devastating tragedy would arrive. My life had already been so far out of the norm. Most kids were

not brutally raped by a neighbor. Most kids grew up with their mothers. Most kids didn't suffer through a sibling being raped inside their home and were helpless to stop it. Extremely few children had parents who were imprisoned for being international spies. I researched it once and found less that there were only some three dozen of us in as many years since Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed for being Soviet spies. Maybe one of these uncommon tragedies, perhaps two, but all of them? As one teacher described it, in my young life I was "dealt an unusually cruel hand of cards." As the plane landed in Springfield, Missouri, I simply could not believe that my hand of cards would now include losing a child to suicide. I had been faithful to my Lord. God would fix this. Somehow God would fix this, I told myself.

42

## Hand of Cards February 28, 2019

I ran from the airplane gate to the rental car counter. I was trying very hard not to cry, feeling compelled to stay focused on the steps I had to take to get to the hospital. The next thing I knew I was anxiously scraping ice from the rental car window, as fast as I could. It was a hurdle that I did not anticipate in my mad rush to the hospital. I scolded myself. *What the fuck is wrong with you? Why didn't you just get in a cab?*

When I finally got to the hospital, I was stunned to find the ICU doors locked. Visiting hours would resume in half an hour. I met Ilya's girlfriend and her family in the waiting room. I had been texting them on the way. We exchanged hugs and they told me they had alerted the nurse that I was about to arrive. They told me the nurse said to just wait for visiting hours to resume when I arrived, then I could go back to see Ilya.

I was simultaneously upset and encouraged when they told me I had to wait. I desperately needed to see Ilya, but if he was near death, certainly the nurse would have taken me right back, no matter the visiting hours. I sat down, hopeful. Then I stood back up. I was not able to sit still. I paced until the hour struck then pushed through the ICU doors to find my son. A nurse greeted me and showed me to his room, telling me that the doctor would be by shortly.

I stood at Ilya's side. His eyes were shut, his head was wrapped in a thick layer of gauze. His face was slightly puffy. But for the beeping of the heart monitor and the rhythmic hissing of the ventilator, the room was silent. Bright winter sunlight beamed through the window, warming me. The serenity felt oddly soothing against the sound of the gunshot that was still resonating in my consciousness. *Look what you've gone and done this time, my child*, I whispered to him. He was covered with a blanket midway up his torso. His strong chest and arms were exposed, the tattoo stretched around his bicep accentuating the muscle. *He's so strong*, I thought, *he can survive this*.

I placed my hand on his forearm and prayed, *Lord, thank you for getting me here safely, bringing me to my son's side. Please save him Lord. I am ready to do all we must do from here, whatever rehabilitation and therapies he might need. We will take care of all of it for him. Just save my child, your beautiful child, Lord.*

My prayer was interrupted by the doctor entering the room. *Hello, Mr. Dolce, you don't have to rush*, he said to me, *I know you just got here. Just wanted to tell you that I'll be in the room across the hall when you're ready to talk.*

*No, no*, I said, *let's talk now*. I followed him into the room. He was joined by the nurse who had greeted me when I entered the ICU. By then, my older brother had arrived from his monastery. He came into the room behind me as did Ilya's girlfriend. The doctor closed the door and sat down. The nurse stayed standing, leaning against the wall. It was a small room, with just a handful of chairs and a small table. I sat in one chair. My brother sat to my left, Ilya's girlfriend opposite



him. The lighting was dim and soft, a stark contrast to the bright sterile lights in the hallway outside.

After introducing my brother and helping the doctor understand that he was not just a priest to support me, but Ilya's uncle, the doctor leaned forward in his chair, facing me, elbows on his knees, his hands clasped together as if in prayer.

*Mr. Dolce, I'm the doctor who spoke to you on the phone yesterday. I've been overseeing your son's care since then. As I told you on the phone, the bullet did a lot of damage. We treated him to keep the swelling of the brain down. You probably noticed his face was swollen.*

*Yes, I did notice that,* I said. I was wringing my hands, anxious to hear what really mattered, what my son's prognosis was, what might lay ahead, what might be done for him.

*I did testing on your son early this morning, to measure brain activity,* the doctor continued. *I'm sorry, Mr. Dolce, but we found no brain activity at all. I respect your need to fly here, to be here for your son, I understand that. But I had to declare him brain dead early this morning. I am very sorry.*

I stayed silent for a moment. I knew what his words meant. I turned away from everyone. *This can't be happening, this can't be happening, oh my God, this can't be happening,* I said out loud. I stood up, took out my phone and called Mandy. I could hardly speak when she answered. All I could say was, "He's gone. I'm so sorry. He's gone. Our child is gone." I collapsed back into a chair to the sound of a mother wailing in grief.

43

Funeral  
March 9, 2019

“Nearer, My God.” The title of William F. Buckley, Jr.’s, memoir resonated with me when I picked it up in a bookstore in 1997, the year that Ilya came into my life. I bought it. It was about Buckley’s strong faith in God, rooted in his Catholic faith which guided his life. Reading it made me feel closer to my mother some fifteen years after her death. She raised my brothers and I to be Roman Catholic too. Her commitment to God and Catholicism defined her and she sought to have it define us too.

Because of her, God was ever present in our lives as I grew up. It was not just a Sunday thing for us. It was every day. We prayed together. We each had prayer books to use on our own. We talked about God. Our meals were always blessed before we ate. We took vacations to Christian religious sites. We never missed Sunday service. My mother rejected the opportunity to go to mass Saturday night instead of Sunday, as our church offered, because she felt it was not being true to the Sabbath. We fasted Sunday morning before mass, water only, to ensure purity for receiving the sacrament of holy communion. It mattered not how many times I passed out during the service from low blood sugar, eating before church remained forbidden. And my mother made sure that I became an altar boy as soon as I was old enough.

Frequently, we drove the seventy mile round trip to give our confessions in Baltimore City, at the Archbishop’s cathedral, the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Each time after exiting the confessional booth, my mother sent me directly to the pews to repent, my fingers grasping the rosary beads one by one as I prayed the prayer designated for each one, not daring to skip even one for fear of offending my Lord. I faithfully concluded each time, *And may the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.*

Draw near to God, my mother taught me. Draw near through prayer. Draw near with a life of devotion to God’s will. Repent for all wrongs, lest they drive me away from God. This lifetime mattered only to serve God. What mattered was pleasing our God to achieve life everlasting, to avoid an afterlife in the pits of Hell, in agony for being separated for eternity from the grace of God’s presence, a grace so great that we as mere humans could not even imagine its splendor.

And she taught me that sin is evil. All sin should be avoided, and we must repent when we fall into sin. Certain sins were worse than others, she told me. “Mortal sins,” they were called, the sins that would cut someone off from God and assure an afterlife in the flames of Hell. Mortal sins were purposeful and planned, premeditated defiance of God’s will and laws. Among those sins, she cautioned me, was murder of oneself, suicide.

Her death from cancer when I was thirteen though brought an end to the daily teachings and exercise of that faith, at least for a time. My father did not take us to church or do anything to continue what she started. When I was old enough to appreciate it, I found it odd that she married

him, given how devoted she was to her religion, while he was not only indifferent, but at times openly hostile to it.

He sat me down with my brothers in the kitchen the day after her death to tell us that we should always remember that “her God” could have saved her, could have answered her prayers, his prayers, our prayers, so that she could still be with us, but He did not.

Even then, at just thirteen, I thought he was wrong to say that, sinful even. My mother spoke always about accepting God’s will and if it was God’s will she died young, she told me before her death, well then it wasn’t our place even to question that. I was in incredible pain the day she died. I didn’t understand why the world kept going that day, why the bus still arrived to take kids to school, why people went to work. My mommy had died. How could anyone do ordinary things? But to blame God didn’t help, I believed. People get cancer. People die from cancer. We were going to be ok. God always provided, always had a plan. Mommy said that. I was going to be ok. God was with me.

Four years later when I ventured off to college, a year early, having been allowed to skip my senior year of high school, one of the first things that I did was seek out the Newman Center, the Catholic campus ministry at secular colleges and universities nationwide. I started attending church again. Later, in law school, I chose a thesis that centered on God, on the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas on “natural law,” those immutable moral principles governing human conduct which people should innately know, for which referring to a religious book or even secular laws should not be necessary. Natural law was the basis of prosecuting and executing Nazis who perpetrated the Holocaust after World War II.

What would my mother say to me now, I asked myself, as I flew home from Missouri? Would she say that my son was to burn in Hell for ending his own life? It’s what she taught me, though her church softened its stance on the sinful nature of suicide in 1983, the year after she died. It removed suicide from its list of mortal sins, though teaching that God could still condemn those who fail to repent having done so after death. So, still labeling it a sin.

The flight home from Missouri felt like the longest one of my life, though I knew that the flights back and forth to Russia had actually been far longer. I flew from St. Louis to Atlanta, changed planes, then home to West Palm Beach. Throughout the journey, I went back and forth between body numbing shock and abject, uncontrollable tears. The flights felt never ending because I just wanted to lie down and curl into a ball, but couldn’t. I caught a few people staring when I looked up. They looked at me with concern, it was obvious something was wrong, but looked away when I looked back. No one approached to say or ask anything, and I figure that was for the best anyway.

During the long layover in Atlanta, I sat on the floor, opened my laptop and started to type. I had been through the terminal probably a hundred times or more with all my business trips through the airport, and it was as busy as ever, but there were still plenty of empty chairs. Each one I tried though felt too close the nearest person, no matter how far down the row or across the aisle they were. After three or four tries, I dropped to the floor and leaned against a thick column. Somehow, sitting on the floor helped me feel more alone, like I had more privacy. It was just shoes and pants moving by. I didn’t have to see any of the faces attached to them.

On the flight from St. Louis, I decided that I wanted to deliver my son's eulogy and I felt the need to start writing right away. There were a few good reasons not to deliver the eulogy, I knew, beginning with whether I could even get halfway through it in the condition I was in. Breaking down in tears in front of so many people, making them suffer through my agony alongside whatever level of grief they were experiencing too, felt unfair. And could I even figure out what to say, what would be meaningful for everyone to hear?

I had my doubts that I would go through with it, or more like doubt that I could go through with it, but I felt it was my last opportunity to be of service to my son, my final act as his father. I wanted to honor who he was. I had to try. I especially didn't want an awkward funeral where everyone was afraid to talk about what happened, that suicide would be the unspoken truth that was on everyone's mind but passed no lips. It had to be me to speak of it first, I felt.

Many years earlier, I had been to a funeral after a suicide and nobody spoke about what happened. Not even the priest, who was Catholic, talked about it, leaving us to ourselves to try to make sense of it. It was as if even mentioning suicide would be speaking the unspeakable. It made me want to leave as soon as possible, so I could be somewhere else where I could talk about it. I didn't want that for my son's funeral.

So, I started typing the eulogy with the message to everyone present that it was ok to say what really happened, that my son took his own life. As I typed those words, uncontrollable tears burned down my face and I buried my face in my hands, weeping out loud, my body trembling. I don't know how long it lasted. I had no sense of time.

Back home, I met with my priest who would provide the funeral mass. I told him that I wanted to deliver the eulogy. He asked if I was sure, saying that most parents wouldn't do it because they couldn't imagine doing it or couldn't get through it to the end. He didn't tell me not to deliver it, but suggested I consider writing out what I wanted to say and have someone else read it for me. They could announce to everyone that it was my words being read, he said.

*No, I have to do this, Father, I said, I have to do this for my boy.*

*Then you will do it, he affirmed to me.*

He asked me though to have it all written out and asked if I would let him read it in advance.

*Of course, I said, I would appreciate your thoughts about it. And I know I can only get through it if I write it all out first.*

When I was finished writing the eulogy a few days later, I gave it to him with the assurance that a dear friend, Glen, would sit nearby the lectern, ready to take over and finish reading it if I couldn't make it through.

*Might be a minute in when I hand it off to Glen, or five minutes, I don't know, Father, but he'll have a copy and will be reading along so he can step in if I need him. But I'm going to start it.*

Faded blue jeans. A pair of hiking boots. A thin black sweater pulled on over a plain, untucked white t-shirt. I put these clothes on to go to my son's funeral. I simply couldn't imagine the formality of wearing a suit and tie. I couldn't be the professional that day. I couldn't don the battle gear of a trial lawyer. I was saying goodbye to a child, to my child.

I took my seat in the front pew when the service started, Mandy seated beside me. When it was time for the eulogy, we walked from the front pew where we were seated, up the two steps to reach the lectern. Mandy took a seat off to the side, ready to read a poem once I was finished with the eulogy. She would read it in English first, then a Russian translator would read it again, in Ilya's native language. I placed my copy of the eulogy on the lectern and looked out across the sanctuary. I was immediately overwhelmed by what I saw. The church was packed with people, from front to back. There were no empty pews. There were at least three hundred people before me. I had attended a few dozen funerals in my quarter century attending this church. It was the rare funeral that filled the room.

Looking across the crowd, I saw lots of family. I saw Ilya's new family, his girlfriend, her parents and close friend who came from Missouri to Florida for the service. There were dozens and dozens of friends from the church. Many of Ilya's friends from his independent living program were there, as were some of his classmates and one of the founders of Believers Academy.

I welcomed them all to the church, telling them how glad Ilya would be to share this place with them. It had been a home to him for some twenty years. Then I told them all that it was ok to speak the truth without reserve, the truth that Ilya ended his own life, that he was mentally ill and disabled from birth, that after years of struggle against it, he gave up. We had to accept that and to honor the fact that he did the best that he could. I spoke of how he tried hard not to be seen as disabled, rather to be seen as a "normal" in a society that too often makes people like him feel lesser than others, whether intentionally or not.

I spoke to them of how he grieved throughout his life for the loss of his birth family, despite all the love he received here, literally embodied in the numerous loving people seated before me. I assured them all that we did what we could within our abilities to lift him up from what ailed his mind and tortured his soul. And I said, "When we ask, 'why did we fail?' we should, I believe, simply be reminded that our Creator gave us the capacity to ask questions that we lack the capacity to answer. Nothing more. Nothing less. It is life on life's terms. It is life on God's terms."

I acknowledged before them all that, "I don't get it. I don't get why my Creator would make such a beautiful world, one that was made brighter and full of hope by my son's smile, only to allow that smile to reside today in my soul as a broken dream. But I do still believe that a God capable of creating such incredible beauty as my son must, indeed, be good – always."

I spoke to them about how I saw Ilya and how his Mama Mandy saw him, that "Ilya walked this world without pretense. What you saw is what you got. He was, as his mama Mandy said many times this past week, 'authentically Ilya,' always. He owned his failings as much as his successes. He told you what he felt and believed, no matter that you might disagree with him. And what he believed about himself, above all else, was that he was happiest helping others."

My words in conclusion were for Ilya. “My dear son, I am so grateful to be your papa.”

My breath caught in my chest. I looked to the ceiling, tears flooding my eyes, blurring the sparkle of colored sunlight through the stained glass windows of the clerestory. I reached out my hand to my right. The priest clasped it into his, gripping hard. The breath flowed back into my lungs. I cast my view back down across the sanctuary, looked across the room to the hundreds who had gathered, and I spoke the final two lines of my son’s eulogy. “I trust that you have now found your peace, God’s peace. I love you always.”

44

## Questions and Answers from the Earth 2018

It was about a year before Ilya died that I picked up a seed, about the size of a nickel, from the ground while I was walking the dog. I wrapped the leash around my arm to make sure he didn't pull away as I sat down to pick the seed apart. I could see it was already cracked partway open. I peeled the layers away, starting with the crusty exterior, to reveal the soft, pale, nondescript center. This becomes this bush, I thought looking now at dozens of seeds ready to fall to the ground like the one I just finished dissecting. I ripped a handful off the bush, along with some of the branches, and stuffed the lot in my pocket.

The next morning, I spilled the seeds across the table where my Sunday school students were seated. *Peel them apart*, I told them.

As they dug into them and ripped them open to reveal three basic layers, I asked, seeing all that they are now, *can you turn these into a bush, like the one I pulled these branches from? Do you know someone who can? Perhaps you know a company that can, I asked? Do you have any idea how it works, how it really happens?*

After much discussion, unable to say yes to any of the questions, we simply agreed that there must be a creator more powerful than ourselves, who could turn a little seed into a thriving bush. You didn't need a Bible, a Torah or a Koran to see that, to believe that. You can believe in God simply by knowing of a little seed that grows to complex life. A powerful lesson, I believed, because it was rooted in what we could all experience without having to accept in blind faith what someone else might tell us, from a book they relied upon by accident of birth.

I had long been troubled by anyone who claimed that the book of their religion was the one true book, the sole source of faith that all must follow. I knew that the Bible was mine because I was born into a Christian family in a society in which Christians were the majority. I could just have well been born Muslim and raised to believe in the Qur'an or Jewish and believed in the Torah. I could believe that the same God spoke to us all through more than one book.

A couple months after I taught that class, one little boy's mother came to me after church one Sunday and thanked me for teaching that lesson. She explained that her son had confided in her that he didn't really believe in God until he sat through it. She told me how grateful she was that I had found a way, and one so simple, to instill faith in her son.

As I taught my class that Sunday from a simple seed, I was reminded that Ilya always wanted to know how things like seeds worked. He asked questions about everything from how water came out of the tap to how a vacuum worked. When he first arrived in the U.S., we spent hours sitting with each other aside construction sites, watching the workers raise buildings from the dirt. When the workers went home, we walked into the sites, to see how the plumbing pipes emerged from

the ground, how electric wires ran through the beams that would one day hold up the walls and encase them all.

Ilya had to see things, visualize them, to understand them. He struggled with explanations that were just in words, a byproduct of having central auditory processing disorder, one of his neurological conditions. When he was a couple years into school, trying to understand time and calendars, the relationship between them evaded him. His teachers worked with him for weeks through rote memorization, to no avail. They asked me to make sure he studied at home.

We found the answer in a donut shop. After trying in vain to quiz him on the different measures of dates and times while he ate his donuts, I started thinking of a way to show him time visually, but not with a clock. The teachers had tried that. I borrowed a pen from the cashier and drew an upside-down pyramid on a napkin, segmenting layers from a second at the smallest section at the point, up to a year at the largest. It worked right away. Ilya could see it. I saw him light up as he came to understand. He never mixed it up again.

As Ilya learned how things people created worked, he then cast his view to the heavens. He wanted to know all there was to know about creation. How were the stars and the planets made? Was there life on other planets and what would that life look like? How were we, as people, created? And why? He believed what he drew from being in my Sunday school class, both as a student and later as a teacher. He believed that there is a God, a creator of all that is. He believed that the answers to life's mysteries are provided to someone when they die. He believed that when people die, the burdens and pain of our earthly existence are relieved, in Heaven, with life everlasting.

As my son lay on the ground in Missouri moments after shooting a bullet into his own head, I fell to the floor in the entryway of an office building, having heard the gunshot that I could not come to believe had just echoed through the phone. *This is not happening*, I said out loud. As horror engulfed all of me, I asked myself, *why didn't I teach him why God wants us to live here until a time He chooses? How could I have missed that?*

I felt helpless in the moment. I had failed. I didn't know the answer to either question.



45

About Alex  
*December 2000*  
*February 27, 2019*

I met Alex Snapp at church a couple years before Ilya came into my life. Alex was a humble, gentle man, tall and physically very strong. He was working as a construction worker when we first met. His ever-present smile across his ruddy sun-tanned face drew in everyone in our community. He was quick to laugh, the first to offer an encouraging word or lend a helping hand, and the last to cast a criticism. A fun-loving, big kid at heart, it was no surprise to see him show up at church sporting Bermuda shorts with a giant Scooby Doo embroidered down one side. His faith was strong. He spoke of God often, invoking His name in the face of every challenge and giving thanks to Him for every blessing. Alex was among my favorite people, ever, and the list of those who loved him as I did was very long.

Ilya was quick to join the list after meeting Alex when he first arrived in Florida. He made a beeline for Alex when we went to church. Alex scooped him up and gave him a big hug every time, laughing and swinging him side to side, before carefully placing him down in the pew to sit next to him. They shared toys and treats and giggles every Sunday. Ilya adored him, so when the time came to baptize him, there was no question that Alex should be his godfather. Alex cheered out loud and pumped his fists into the air when I asked him to be that person in Ilya's life, calling out to his wife, *Did you hear this, Missy? I'm going to be Ilya's godfather!*

To the month, Alex died of cancer three years after he met Ilya. I took Ilya to a fast-food restaurant to tell him over a meal that his godfather was gone. We arrived well before the dinner rush and picked a table far from the few others who were in the dining room, giving us some privacy if Ilya became upset, which I assumed he would. I wasn't sure Ilya would understand the concept of death. We had experienced no deaths together and I did not know if he had any such experience in Russia.

So, I described where Alex had gone, to the wonderous and beautiful Heaven I was assured waited for Alex and the rest of us, where Jesus had prepared a place for us all, as I was told as a child. As I explained all this, Ilya listened carefully. He did not cry. He said he would miss Alex but was glad he had gone to Heaven, he told me, because it sounded so wonderful. And then he said, "I want to go there too."

*Not yet, I told him. Not now. We can't just decide to go. But you will be reunited with Alex one day in Heaven. You will have fun with Alex again, I promise.*

Ilya's last two words on this Earth were uttered as he lay dying on the ground, after he chose his time to leave this place, his phone fallen at his side, still connected to me as I called out through it for him to say something to me, say anything. I didn't want to believe that the gunshot I heard was really that. In the silent moments after it rang out, I couldn't accept it.

*I love you, please say something, anything*, I pleaded, desperately needing to hear his voice, to know that he was fine, that the sound I heard was something else, or that he had pulled away from the bullet just in time. *Please talk to me, please say something*, I begged, again and again.

And then I heard him gasp. “Dad. Dad.”

## Epilogue

Since I was a teenager, I have voraciously read the news. While my high school classmates carried around *Rolling Stone*, *People* and *Hot Rod*, I had *Newsweek*, *Time* and *The Baltimore Sun* in my backpack. With all the tragedy I experienced years before I even met Ilya, I felt deep empathy for the stories of trauma and loss people suffered that were spread across the headlines. I could relate to them, whether they suffered abuses, death, crimes. I grieved for others I had never met, for their losses, their disappointments, their tragedies.

Among them all, the tragedy that gripped me the most throughout my life, the only one I wanted to turn away from when it showed up on the page, was the death of a father before his child was born. It mattered not whether he died in a car crash, from disease, a criminal's attack, or in war. Perhaps because I lost my mother so young, I grieved for the child who would never know that parent, who would never feel his embrace, receive his love and support, his sage advice earned over years of life, share with him laughter and tears. Once I became a father myself, I felt the loss for the departed father, never having had the chance to be that father to his child.

Ilya's daughter, Nadia Grace, was born seven months after his death. I do not know if he even knew that she had been conceived. And it really doesn't matter to me if he did, or perhaps I just do not want to know. Either way, my granddaughter has suffered a profound loss and I feel devastated for her.

She is a beautiful child. She has a loving, devoted mother, who regularly sends me precious photos of her. She is surrounded by equally loving friends and extended family. Her other grandparents who live with her adore her and help nurture her every day.

For reasons that I do not fully understand, I struggled to embrace her when she was born. I did not go with Mandy and Luke when they flew to Missouri to meet her and welcome her to the family and this world. I made no excuses, aside from admitting that if I met her then, I would most likely break down in grief in front of her and she didn't need that. So, I just stayed home. I have felt selfish about that and I have felt inadequate as a grandfather. She deserved to be welcomed into this world by me, with joy. But I couldn't get past my grief to do so.

I hope one day, when she is older and wants to know more about her father from the person who knew him best, that I can share with her all that I know of him. I believe that she will feel loss for the father she will never meet, not here, but I hope that she feels an abundance of love from all those left behind whose lives were touched by her father, my son, Ilya. And I hope one day that I can be all the grandfather to her that I should be.

I hope these things for her, but I have not prayed for them. By the time she was born, I came to admit to myself that I no longer knew how to pray. I no longer had any real sense of who I was praying to, or what to expect in return, or if any god was actually listening. So, one day, I just stopped praying. The most I do now is join in prayer with others when invited.

When that day came, I was not angry at the God I was raised to believe in, the way my father was angry with Him when my mother died. But I think that day I didn't know God any longer because I can't understand how the God I was raised to believe in, a loving merciful god, who has a plan for one and all and for everything, an all-powerful and intercessory God, could allow such an early end to such a beautiful, sensitive life. To allow the end of a life of valiant struggle without resolution. To allow the end a father's life before his child could meet him.

And it's not that I don't know how this world works or think it should work differently for me than it does for others. While trying to keep perspective on that fact, I looked up how many people die each day, impacting the lives of dozens of their loved ones, if not more. I learned that approximately eight thousand people die each day in the United States alone. Looking worldwide, the daily death rate I learned was about one hundred fifty thousand. And my type of loss, the loss of a child, is shared by many other parents and I have met more parents who have outlived more than one of their children than I ever expected I would.

I did not expect the God I was raised to believe in would assure a happy ending for my son's challenges, or anyone else's, but I cannot comprehend why that God allowed an ending before my son could find peace, here, to be able to embrace truly the love he craved that was actually present in his life, within reach. Instead, to his last moments, he grasped in vain for the love he felt he should have had all along, from the moment of his birth, love from his birth family, in his home nation. He needed love that, to him, came from where it should have come from, not from where it was offered.

And candidly, if there's one big Divine plan for each person, I can't figure it out. I don't know why this would happen to me, after all the trauma and loss that I endured long before my son was in my life, horrible stuff that most people thankfully never experience. Through it all, I believed in what I was taught about God. I lived a life of prayer, I tried to guide my life not by my will, but what I believed in good faith to be the will of the God I was raised to believe in, to serve that God. I believed, as I was raised to believe, that I could find peace and meaning in any of life's challenges and losses with God's help, with His presence. But I simply find myself now unable to comprehend the master plan, here, after all that I already endured, in true faith, before suffering the most indescribable pain that I could have ever imagined. A pain that won't subside, a pain that thousands of tears have not washed away.

While I didn't feel that I was angry at the God I was raised to believe in, I did find myself angry, though, with the strident messages and lessons drilled into me about a sense of God that failed me when my son was killed by his own hand. I held onto that God as long as I could before I found it within myself simply to be honest about how I now feel and how different it is. The God that I was raised to believe in, who I did believe in so fervently for so many years, simply feels gone. Gone from another crushing trauma in life that simply didn't fit into the essential nature of the God I was taught to pray to, daily, for guidance and strength, for healing, for solace, for reconciliation. The God that would intervene to protect me, help me, and bless me for my faith.

I understand the doctrine, academically. Our rewards for what we do here are waiting for us in Heaven, so there are no guarantees here. I could accept it all for myself, but this was different. Accepting it for my child simply felt different to me. This place, this Earth, is supposed to mean

something. It feels like it does, to me, deeply. There are consequences here to what happens here. And they can be profound, good or bad. My son's destruction simply left me unable to believe in what I was raised to believe and, in turn, taught him to believe.

Those lessons, I came to feel, did not serve my child well. Together, we did right, we went round right, we trusted. My intrinsic ability to trust in the God I was raised to believe in, the all-powerful, intercessory God, the healing God, the God who would provide solace in our darkest moments, collapsed to the ground with my son. I could no longer feel that God's presence within me.

As I came to accept that fact, I found that I still believed in a creator, the one who could grow a bush from a small seed. My faith was thrust back to that point of basic understanding. But the fact that I believe in God, a creator, has not stopped me from feeling apart from that God.

And I feel apart from my son in ways I have never felt apart from others I love when they have died, even my mother. I stand aside his grave and ask aloud, "Where did my child go?" I have always known where my children are, until now. More than two years on and I can still barely stand to look at a photo of Ilya. A smile that once brought instant joy, now pains every fiber of my being. I cannot bear to look for more than a fleeting glance at photos of that smile, the grief too raw. It is simply a struggle to embrace true joy because I do not know where my son is or how he is doing.

And for the first time, the death of a loved one leaves me feeling apart from the living. Even holidays have become days to help others celebrate, as if I am a waiter at someone else's wedding reception. I am trying not to feel this way, but I must be honest and say that I do. And I believe I know why.

One day in Sunday school a few years before Ilya died, I wrote across the board as my students were arriving, "What on Earth is Heaven All About?" I started most of our classes with a question like that for us to explore. We spent the entire class that day discussing what my students believed Heaven is all about.

They all told me that they believed God was with everyone in Heaven, that it is a beautiful place, with lots of light, music and angels with wings, that everything there is joyful, and everyone is full of love. One student said the Bible tells us there are no tears and no pain in Heaven. Another added that people in Heaven, especially our departed family members, look down on us on Earth and can see how we are doing.

Continuing my approach to teaching my students by challenging them to defend their beliefs, I asked the class if they all agreed with their classmates. *Is there no pain in Heaven? Do our deceased loved ones keep watch over us now?* The universal answer was yes, our loved ones watch over us from Heaven and suffer no pain there.

That established, I asked, *but can our loved ones see us, see our suffering, see our pain as we miss them? If you love someone and can't be with them, and can't comfort them, don't you miss them and feel pain? Isn't that pain part of the love you feel for them?* Uncharacteristically, they fell silent for a long time, looking back and forth at each other but finding no answer.

Then one little boy, seated to my left at the end of the table looked to me and said, in a barely audible voice, “Yes.”

That little boy was the same child who found his faith in God in the class session where we dissected the simple seeds that could grow into a bush, the class where we came to agree that there must be a creator powerful enough to do that.

That same little boy, then growing into adolescence, came with his family to Ilya’s funeral. Among the dozens and dozens of people who approached me that day when the funeral mass was over, he was the one person to do so but not say a single word. Not one word. He simply looked up at me with his eyes narrowed in pain and tearing up, reached his arms around me and hugged me.

## The End

If God is one who would pick up and embrace a wounded, debilitated child, even though that child is no longer able to hold onto and believe the truths of God and creation taught by his mama, then perhaps I can know that God.

If God is one who can dry the tears and comfort the mind of a child helpless in his struggle to make sense of creation, then perhaps I can know that God.

If God is one who can provide the answers to clear the mind of a child so deeply confused by having once believed in his soul that God's presence was both within and without, always, only to find himself standing alone in a godless void, then perhaps I can know that God.

If God is one who can not only make sense of the inhumanity of His creation, but can justify that inhumanity to his beautiful children, then perhaps I can know that God.

If God is one who would come to lift up a warrior who so many times swung a sword mightily in His name to champion the children of His creation, a warrior felled not by any foe, but suddenly crumpled to the ground by the loss of his own precious child, and if that God has the strength to inscribe *alpha* back into that sword's handle and *omega* back into its blade, then perhaps I can know that God.

If God is one who would hold in His arms a child who is simply no longer capable of meeting any conditions of salvation, one truly forgiving of a child who can no longer embrace the name any Abraham, Moses, Jesus or Muhammed, then perhaps I can know that God.

If God is one who would heal the tortured, traumatized soul of a child who has known so few moments of living peace in His creation, a God accepting of the fact that it is too much to ask of that child in the aftermath of it all, *Have faith in Me*, then perhaps I can know that God.

If that God is one truly capable of such unconditional love, the love I have felt for Ilya since I first saw him in a photograph, the relieving and profoundly peaceful moment of love that I felt when I was first able to embrace my child in a Russian orphanage seven thousand miles from home, then I can believe that God will save and restore me when I die. I can believe that is the God who is caring now from my child, the God who will reunite me with the son I miss every day to the depths of my soul, so that I can embrace him once again, to feel his love again, to feel whole again.

If that God does not exist, then I simply cannot conceive of any god.

Michael Dolce  
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